

Harry Potter and the Resuscitation of Agapé

Year 6 at Hogwarts

by Jessica X

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NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR: In lieu of the near completion of this fiction, I have removed my original AuthorNote; I realized how silly it is to have one in the first chapter. Enjoy the fic, though! Reviews, comments, suggestions? I absolutely THRIVE on them. :)

Chapter One: Post Peculiarity

The waning summer sun shone brilliantly through the window onto the face of a young man. He beamed back up at it with equal enthusiasm. The round-framed glasses resting on the bridge of his nose caught the glare of the sun's rays, reflecting back in the window and into the other parts of the automobile he was seated in the rear of. As the car sped off toward its destination, he turned his attention from what lay outside the glass to what was reflecting in its surface.

He was pleased with the fact that his sixteen-year-old face had not grown yet paler in the past months. In fact, it held a slight hint of tan, one that would be hardly noticeable to any but those closest to him. His daily excersize routine that he had developed, hoping it would aide in passing the time, had developed his body. Where there had been merely a sickly, scrawny physique now lay muscle tone. All these factors contributed to a general appearance of good health.

But alas, he could never prevent the shadow of a frown that descended upon him the instant his eyes rested on his face's lone blemish, leering out at him from beneath his unkempt hair. The lightning bolt-shaped scar, a constant reminder of who he was, and why he had it. For you see, the boy approaching manhood in

question was the furthest thing from an ordinary child that you could hope for.

Harold James Potter, the discontented individual in the backseat, was nothing short of one of the greatest wizards of our time. His victory over the vile Lord Voldemort at the tender age of one has worked itself into the stuff of legends in the past fifteen years. As if that weren't enough to ensure his place in wizarding history, he has thwarted the Dark Lord's attempts to regain power at every turn since; that is, with the exception of his most recent. Ever since then, he has merely been able to escape with his own life, and aided at holding Voldemort's malevolence at bay.

These triumphs, however, are certainly nothing he likes to go on about. The price paid for fame in this case is higher than Harry would have been willing to pay. Nevertheless, it has been thrust upon him, and for the past five years since he became aware of the wizarding world, he has had no alternative but to make do with the hand he's been dealt.

A deep sigh issued from his throat. He wouldn't let it overshadow this day, the day he would again see his friends. The day he would return to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

He had been hoping that over the summer he could visit with his friends; in fact, after the sendoff he had received last year, he had almost counted on it. But things had been so hectic at The Burrow, home to the Weasley family, that he hadn't even been invited. He understood the reasons why; ever since Lord Voldemort had returned to power, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley's duties in the Order of the Phoenix had undoubtedly increased exponentially. Ron and Ginny, the two Weasley children that still remained at home, were probably caught up in the whirlwind as well. But, of course, Ron had found time to send an owl now and then, though the letters were always unsatisfyingly short.

Then there were his other friends and acquaintances; Fred and George Weasley had sent him an owl lugging a sack of Galleons, informing him that it's his share of the profits in their joke shop and that business hasn't yet faltered. Of course, Harry wanted nor needed

any money from them, but the twins seemed to predict this, and the letter stated adamantly multiple times that they wouldn't accept a single Knut back. Remus Lupin, his former Defense Against The Dark Arts professor and something of an uncle to him, had written him of events transpiring within the Order. Everything was quite vague, which was to be expected, considering the secrecy they had to operate under to ensure that information could not be leaked to You-Know-Who. As everyone else had done, Hagrid, the Hogwarts groundskeeper, had sent him a birthday present. His gift was a knife made of a hippogriff claw, which was something he would only expect from Hagrid. Surprisingly, he received a birthday card signed by several members of the Order, including Lupin, Nymphadora Tonks, Mad-Eye Moody, and strangely enough, Professor Snape. Undoubtedly he'd been pestered into signing by Lupin or someone else.

A dull ache resonated through him at the thought of the card from the Order. His godfather's name, the signature of Sirius Black, should have been on there. But he had spent weeks grieving. He was determined not to sink back into the depths of depression. Sirius would have wanted it that way.

His thoughts returned to the last bit of post he had received. Cho Chang, a girl he'd fancied very much during the past few years, had sent an owl bearing what was more along the lines of a note than a letter. It said merely:

Harry,

Sorry about last year. Truly. See you in September.

Cho

He'd been tempted to toss it in the bin the instant he'd finished it. Things had grown so strange between them over the past year at school that he wasn't even sure if he cared to talk to her anymore. He realized it was merely due to a series of misunderstandings, but the fact remained that they hadn't said a single word to each other the last several times they saw each other. Hermione had tried to explain this all to him, but it still made no sense.

Hermione.

Of all the owls he'd received over the summer, none of them puzzled him more than what he received from Hermione Granger. For the better part of the summer, not a word had come to him from her. It was inconceivable; Hermione loved reading and writing more than anything else on the planet. Then, in the past week, she'd sent one on:

Dear Harry,

I know I haven't written a word to you all this break, and you have my sincerest apologies. Hope you've been well! Did you have a chance to pick up your schoolthings? I've been away from home, summering in America - I've only just got back. It's really been quite the experience, and I can hardly wait to tell you all about it, but I'll save that for when we arrive at school, as I know how much you hate to read (only kidding; though you STILL need to read Hogwarts: A History!).

See you soon!

Hermione Granger

This letter, penned in her immaculate handwriting, seemed to fill in all the holes, and everything now made sense. That is, it did for a whole three days, until he received another hastily-scribbled post the previous evening.

Harry,

If you can, please meet me at Platform Nine-And-Three-Quarters a bit early. There's something I wish to tell you that I've been putting off for ages, and I don't think I can bear the burden any longer. But it must be in private. An hour or so should do it, but don't feel bad if you can't turn up early.

Hermione

It had addled him for hours, causing him to have a fitful sleep. He did, however, manage to awaken an hour earlier than he normally would. He had convinced his legal guardians to drop him off earlier as well, which was not an easy task, considering...

"For God's sake, STOP THAT, you wretched little cur!"

Harry's eyes darted upward. He'd been tapping the glass of his window absent-mindedly, which had, of course, upset Uncle Vernon.

"Sorry, I was only-"

"Only trying to drive me mad, were you?" he growled from under his bristling moustache, beady eyes glaring at him from the rearview mirror. "Kindly keep your fingers away from my windows, boy, or we'll dump you on the spot and you can leg it all the way to your ruddy train!"

"Yes, sir."

Vernon Dursley, his gangly horse-faced wife Petunia, and their corpulent son Dudley had been nothing short of a nightmare to live with for the past fifteen years. Ever since he'd been deposited on their doorstep, he'd been viewed as a blight, an unwelcome pet they'd been forced to take care of for a vacationing friend. Though this past summer had been a dull one, it hadn't been as unbearable as summers past; the words Mr. Weasley and Mad-Eye Moody had left with the Dursleys (particularly Moody's words) seemed to have stayed with them, and they'd mostly ignored him since. Aunt Petunia was staring out the window listlessly, and Dudley was absorbed in his handheld video game. The only way he'd gotten them to agree to taking him early was the incentive that they'd be rid of him sooner.

"I want another game, Daddy."

"You can get one after we make our deposit, Diddums," Aunt Petunia cooed. Their "deposit" was undoubtedly dropping Harry off at the train depot.

Dudley's fat face pinkened. "Now! I've nearly finished this one, and it's boring!"

"We'll get you one later, son," Uncle Vernon said, firmly but with an undercurrent of pride. "We'll just get rid of him first, then we'll take you to the toy store to see about it."

Dudley grumbled for a moment, then settled back to his game.

Harry's thoughts returned to all the strange letters he'd received. He'd actually received one from Seamus Finnigan and his mother, apologizing for their behaviour the past year. Neville Longbottom had written him to ask if they'd be continuing the D.A. meetings, which they'd only started to learn proper Defense Against The Dark Arts in the absence of a proper teacher. He'd even received scattered post concerning the Daily Prophet's article on him, either commending him for his bravery against Voldemort, or assuring him that they'd always believed him, or both.

But above all, the abruptly frank note from Cho and the two conflicting letters from Hermione kept swimming to the forefront.

Before he knew it, he was arriving at King's Cross. Uncle Vernon grudgingly unloaded his trunk and the cage containing his owl, Hedwig, onto a trolley.

"Bye, then," Harry said. His uncle merely grunted and stomped back toward the car.

As Harry pushed his things toward the barrier between platforms nine and ten, he couldn't help but begin to feel apprehensive. Was Ron supposed to be there early as well? He checked his watch: 10:02. What did Hermione want to talk with him about that would take an hour? He hoped it wasn't something terribly upsetting, not the first day. He hated himself for feeling so selfish, but he couldn't help it. The last year had been such a ghastly ordeal that this year had to be a good one... it just had to.

Casting a wary glance around him, he strode quickly through the barrier and emerged on the magically-hidden Platform Nine-And-

Three-Quarters. Before him gleamed the Hogwarts Express, brilliant red and highly-polished as ever it was. A handful of students were already littered about; most of them seemed to be either prefects or first years.

One of said prefects, a girl with bushy brown hair, came running up to him.

"Oh, Harry, you made it!"

"Hello, Hermione," he replied, grinning. "All right, then?"

"Yes, of course," she said breathlessly with a pleasant smile. "You?"

"As good as can be expected," he said, trying not to frown as much as he wanted to.

"Oh..." Evidently, he hadn't succeeded, and her mouth slanted slightly. "That's right, Ron told me you didn't get to visit The Burrow."

"Yeah. It's okay, I know they're busy and all that... it's just, I wish I could've at least stopped by for a weekend."

Hermione smiled. "I'm sure once you pass your Apparition tests you'll be popping in constantly."

"That's right," he said, cocking his head slightly. "I'd nearly forgotten we've only a year or so to go."

"C'mon, let's stow our things in the train!"

They picked an empty compartment in the very rear and put their trunks up top. Harry set his owl cage on the floor near the window, and Hermione set her new pet-carrier containing her cat, Crookshanks, next to it.

"Wow, Harry!" Hermione suddenly said, her eyes slightly wide. "You look... great!"

"Eh?"

"Well, you look a shade darker, and... have you been working out?"

"Oh, yeah..." he grinned sheepishly. "I had to do SOMETHING to keep from going mad over the summer, and I figured it might as well be something healthy."

She squeezed his bicep somewhat cheekily. "So, heavy weights and all that lot?"

"Just exercise... bit of running, pushups, the like." His ears were a bit red now. "I biked to London."

Her eyes widened further. "All that way?!"

"Well, I couldn't see any other way of getting to Diagon Alley. By the time the owl with my list turned up, I was more than fit enough for the journey."

"I'm impressed, Harry. Good to see you haven't been squandering the summer, even IF you haven't been studying."

He coughed slightly. "Er, who says I haven't been studying?"

She smiled slyly. "Oh, come off it. For the many things Professor Potter is, 'workoholic' is not one of them."

"Well..." He let out a gust and sat down. Her ribbing him for his role of teaching D.A. classes kind of caught him off guard. "Okay, fine, but I have been studying! Just not loads and loads or anything."

"How often?"

His eyes moved from her stern-yet-amused expression to her tapping shoe. "I flipped through the new Charms book... and I worked out the first few inches of the Astronomy essay."

"HARRY!" Crookshanks meowed at her outburst, clawing at the cage bars.

"I know, I know." He shrugged while Hermione shook her head at him.

"There's really nothing for it, is there? You are hopeless, Harry Potter."

She stared him down for a few moments. It was obvious her goading was good-natured; she was smiling all the while. Harry cast around for a subject that didn't involve how dim he was.

"So, er... I made it early, as you asked. It was lucky my Aunt and Uncle were in a good mood."

"Oh, yeah..." Her face suddenly fell slightly, and her voice seemed to shrink. "I'd... sort of forgotten..."

Harry hesitated a moment. "Wh... What's up?"

She looked at him. It was a furtive, apprehensive look. She tried to smile, but it didn't quite agree with her actions.

"I... I almost didn't write that note at all... it... I was quite nervous..."

"I noticed you'd written it in an awful hurry." He placed a hand on her arm tentatively. "What's wrong?"

She quickly sat down across from him, pulling out of his grip. He blinked for several moments, his mind racing. He had an inkling what was coming next, but he couldn't be sure, and it was so outrageous... was she going to tell him that she...?

"H-Harry," she began in a voice that was shaking slightly. "I've been meaning to tell you something for the past few years. It's... it's something I think you deserve to know."

He began to lean in and put his hand on her thigh or arm or something, but she didn't seem to want to be touched, so he refrained.

"Oh, Harry... I'm sorry... I should've told you a long time ago."

"Told me what?" he said, curiosity seeping from every inch of his being.

"Well..."

It was perhaps the worst possible timing in the history of this or any other planet, but right then Neville Longbottom poked his round head into their compartment.

"Have either of you seen- oh, it's you! Hi Harry, Hermione!"

"Ehrm, hi, Neville!" Hermione shouted a bit loudly. Harry beamed, trying to cover up his disappointment with not being able to find out what was bothering Hermione. He stole a glance over, and she was feigning delight as well. Neither of them disliked the boy; on the contrary, he was one of their closest friends. But this had been a most inopportune moment! "Looking for Trevor, I suppose?"

"Yeah," he said, eyes moving over the room, searching for his pet toad. "I swear, one of these days I'm just gonna bin him and get an owl or something."

Harry shrugged. "Haven't seen him, mate, but good luck!"

"Thanks," he said absentmindedly, ducking back out of the compartment.

"Okay," Harry said, clearing his throat slightly, "now what were you saying?"

"I... oh nevermind."

"Hermione-"

"Look, I don't think this was a good idea," she suddenly blurted, "talking about it here, I mean. I'll... I'll tell you some other time." She sighed heavily, as if she wanted nothing more in the world but to tell him whatever she was hiding, and that putting it off was killing her inside.

"But-"

Again, a head poked into their compartment, and Harry broke off as he looked around.

"Thought I recognized those profiles," Seamus Finnigan said, grinning. "All right, Harry? Hermione?"

"Yeah," Harry said. He had a feeling his grin was more of a grimace.

"Great!" Hermione said brightly. "How've you been?"

"Pretty good. Mum's been in a right state all summer. She keeps pouring over books on countercurse. Reckons You-Know-Who's gonna drop down the chimney and start blasting any day now."

Harry and Hermione laughed appreciatively.

"Quite the turn-around, eh?" Seamus grinned, then glanced over his shoulder. "Dean's saving me a seat, I'd better go claim it. Later!"

"Bye, then," they said in unison. The doors had barely shut when Hermione spoke.

"Harry, please, just drop it. I... I don't want to talk about it anymore."

"I don't even know what you don't want to talk about!" he replied indignantly. "You send on this cryptic little note that's got my curiosity all peaked, then you change your mind? That's not on, Hermy."

The instant the last two syllables had escaped his lips, he wished they hadn't. He hadn't meant to use the nickname Grawp had for her, which he knew she loathed (not to mention the fact that she was scared witless at the sight of Grawp); his tongue had just sort of slipped up. But that didn't explain why she looked so aghast. Her eyes had shot wide the instant he'd finished, and suddenly they darted toward the door and back to him.

"What?!"

"I- sorry, I didn't mean to call you that, really, I know you don't like it." He chanced a look at her, and she seemed to have relaxed a touch.

"Oh... no, it's okay, don't worry about it."

"Hermione-" he made extra care to pronounce it correctly this time "- what is the matter?! Please, I want to know... maybe I can help somehow."

She laughed, a hollow, mirthless laugh. "I don't really think you can."

"Then just tell me!"

She looked steadily at him, and her expression had never looked more sober. Her jaw was set, and there was a hint of a wrinkle in her forehead. Her breathing was quick and shallow.

"Harry," she said, and her voice, barely above a whisper, shook slightly. "You cannot breathe a word of this to anyone, you understand me? Not even Ron."

His eyebrows shot up into his hairline. "Not even Ron?"

"Swear to me, Harry," she said, a quiet desperation quivering in her words. "You have to swear it. Please."

Harry gaped at her. The fleeting, ridiculous notion that she might have fallen for him was obliterated by the strange way she was acting. It seemed more serious, and less pleasant.

"SWEAR!" she repeated, fidgeting absentmindedly with her skirt. "Not a single soul, including Ron!"

"Of- of course," he stammered. "But I don't-"

Again the door slid back, and almost as if on cue, Ron walked into the compartment, his owl Pigwidgeon's cage swinging from his hand, a large grin spreading across his freckles.

"Wotcher, you two!" he said, winking at them.

"Hello, Tonks," Hermione said with a wry grin. "Why on earth would you want to assume such an ugly shape?"

Ron's grin fell in indignation. "UGLY?!"

Harry and Hermione burst into fits of laughter, and after a moment Ron joined in as he set Pig's cage next to Hedwig's. Pig tittered excitedly, and Hedwig refused to acknowledge him.

"Back in half a mo, just got to grab my trunk," he said, hastening back out.

Harry glanced around, and saw that Hermione was still staring at the compartment doors with a grin hitched onto her face. He looked harder, and realized that her eyes were still filled with sadness.

"Not a word," she said in a strained sort of voice. She did not turn to look at him. "You swore."

'Not a word of WHAT?!' he thought heatedly. But Hermione was his friend, and he would, of course, honor his word to her.

The remainder of the trip to Hogsmeade Station was pleasant and uneventful; mostly due to the fact that Ron and Hermione had to go and sit with the other prefects in the first car, then trudge up and down the aisles keeping students in line. Neville, Ginny and Luna Lovegood eventually joined him as had been the case the year prior. As the train set off through the countryside, they discussed the events of the summer, reminisced on the events of last term (carefully avoiding tender subjects such as the Veil and Bellatrix Lestrange), and listened politely to Luna's passionate tale of her and her father's hunt for the Crumple-Horned Snorkack (fruitless, of course). Eventually, as the sun began to set, their two prefects rejoined them and their attention turned to Hermione's summer, spent largely in New York City. Ron and Ginny were doubled up at her explanation of how Muggle lifts work.

"And they fly up and down when you press the buttons?" Ron asked skeptically.

"Well, not so much FLY," she replied patiently. "They're pulled on ropes."

"And who pulls them?"

"Well, no one."

"NO ONE!" Ron shook his head, chuckling. "I swear, you ought to write a book on all the mental things Muggles think up. It'd be a riot, nobody would believe it!"

As they got off the platform ("Firs' years, over here!") and reached the procession of carriages, Harry, Neville and Luna gave the ghastly thestral hitched to their cart an appreciative pat, while Ron, Hermione and Ginny hung back warily.

"Those mad things really hitched up there, then?" Ron asked.

"Just because you can't see them doesn't mean they're going to pull us straight into the lake," Luna said casually.

As they rode up to the castle, Harry kept stealing brief glances at Hermione, who was talking animatedly to Ginny about the Statue of Liberty. It was as if he had shown up at Platform Nine-And-Three-Quarters on time, and he and her had never had any form of private conversation. Once, her eyes fell briefly on him as she was laughing; they lingered for a moment, then snapped back to Ginny. He would barely remember later what Neville was telling him about his mimbulus mimbeltionia, or Ron's umpteenth apology for not inviting him to summer at the Burrow. His mind was filled with one nagging question: what the bloody hell was going on with Hermione?

To Be Continued

Chapter Two: The Swing of Things

"Welcome back to Hogwarts!"

The chatter that had filled the Great Hall following the sorting of the new students died quickly as Albus Dumbledore spoke.

"A few words before we lose ourselves in our mouthwatering feast. Our first years should note that the forest on the grounds is off limits to all students. Mr. Filch, our caretaker, has amended his list of illegal items to include anything from Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, an amusing joke shop in Diagon Alley. This list can be found hanging outside his office door."

Almost everyone at the Gryffindor table exchanged grins, as did several students at the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables.

"Finally, on a more serious note, the return of Voldemort-" several students and a few teachers flinched "-to power has impressed upon the staff the need to gird our minds and strengthen our skills. As much as I hope I am mistaken, I fear dark times are ahead for all of us. It saddens me that the applicants for the Defense Against the Dark Arts position were, shall we say... nonexistent. However, as I have just stated, there is nothing we could be learning that is more important at such an hour." The headmaster sighed heavily, straightened the half-moon spectacles on his crooked nose, and continued.

"That said, allow me to introduce our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher... me."

There was a brief, shocked silence, followed immediately with a rush of murmurs.

"Settle down, settle down," he said quietly, and a hush fell over the room once again. "A move such as this is uncommon, I know, but there really wasn't much of an alternative. The idea actually came to me from a previous teacher of said subject. After all, if dear Professor Umbridge was up to the task of both of these AND High Inquisitor, I can only hope to do as... well as she."

A few students laughed nervously, and Dumbledore smiled.

"Enough of my ramblings. Tuck in!"

And as he said this, the golden platters in front of them filled with tantalizing dishes.

"Dobby's mates really outdid themselves," Ron managed around a mouthful of potato. "So, what d'you reckon? I mean, Dumbledore teaching?"

"He's taught before," Harry said, helping himself to turkey dressing. "But his subject was Transfiguration back in those days."

"I'm sure he's more than qualified," Neville put in.

"Snape looked livid when Dumbledore was telling us," Seamus said, nodding toward the high table. "Poor git got passed up again."

"Snape always looks like that," Ron said offhandedly.

"But surely Dumbledore could've found SOMEONE to take the job?" Harry's eyes lit up. "An Auror, or-"

"They're all too busy," Ron said. "Tonks stopped by The Burrow twice all summer, for about five minutes each."

"It's obvious why no one wanted to take the job," Hermione said shortly, pouring more pumpkin juice into her goblet.

"Yeah, 'cause it's cursed," Dean Thomas said promptly.

"Beyond that," she said. "Now they know Voldemort's back - Ron, get over it, already! - even less people want to risk helping Dumbledore outright. They don't want Voldemort to see them as a threat, or even a more appealing target."

"Chicken-hearts," Ron mumbled, reaching for a chicken breast.

After they had all had their fill, Dumbledore stood again and dismissed them. As they were ascending the great marble stairs, Harry caught sight of Cho.

She stopped, and several Ravenclaw second years bumped into her from behind. She stared straight at him, biting her dark, shimmering hair absentmindedly, then glanced somewhere right behind him. He turned to see Hermione standing there, piercing Cho with a determined look. As he turned to look at Cho again, he saw only the back of her head as she disappeared into the crowd.

"What was that business about?" he said, continuing up the stairs.

"You'll find out soon enough," Hermione muttered. "At least, I hope so."

He rounded on her. "Does this have anything to do with what you-"

Hermione had whipped a finger to her lips, a look of panic breaking out on her face. Harry nodded curtly, then rejoined the procession to Gryffindor tower.

As they entered the common room ("Portable Swamp" was the password, which they all thought was brilliant), Harry immediately pulled Hermione over to their favourite squashy armchairs by the fireplace.

"All right, explain yourself," he demanded in a low voice.

"Harry-"

"What are you on about? And what in the bloody freaking hell are you and Cho up to?!"

"Harry, it's not-"

"I barely caught a wink last night, I was too busy wondering what was wrong with y-"

"SHUT UP!"

He was so startled to hear her hiss at him like that, and to see how badly she was shaking with mingled frustration and fear, that he fell silent obediently.

"Not... here..." she whispered, her eyes bulging slightly. "Please, I'm begging you for the last time, drop it! I'll tell you everything, I promise, but not now, and not here!"

He still had no idea what was going on, but seeing her like that - so utterly distraught, counting on him, pleading with him...

"Okay. You're driving me mad, you know, but... okay."

She smiled weakly, then made to get up.

"Wait, where are you going? We can still-"

"No, we can't," she said, rather abruptly. "I'm sorry, Harry... I know I'm being a bit rude, but... I think I need to be alone for a while. I'll... I'll see you at breakfast."

And then she was ascending the stairs to the girls' dormitories, and Harry was staring after her, utterly vexed.

"What was that all about?"

He looked up and was startled to see Ron and Ginny sitting down.

"I... I don't really know, to be honest. I guess she was just tired."

"Hmm." Ron shrugged, then reached into his pocket. "Fizzing Whizbee? I think I've got a few left..."

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Harry's sleep was not restful, and was fraught with strange dreams, including one where a house-elf with Hermione's face kept trying to tell him something, then started pelting herself with Fizzing Whizbees. As a result, he was distinctly groggy at breakfast.

"You look like a Skrewt got hold of you," Neville said. "What's up?"

"Kept having stupid dreams," he mumbled, spreading jam on his toast.

"I had one, too," Seamus said, putting down his orange juice. "You-Know-Who came flying out of the fireplace at me mam, but then Harry popped out of a dustbin and started throwing Pumpkin Pasties at him."

"Bet that sorted him," Harry said, grinning sleepily.

"I guess so, as then he turned into a giraffe."

"Blimey," Ron breathed, staring at the new schedules they'd just been handed. "Double Potions, first thing! Why, oh why did I actually study for that O.W.L.? I could've been rid of Snape forever!"

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The day passed without any noteworthy events (he received a zero from Snape, which was on par). It also passed without Hermione; she seemed to turn up just in time for class, did her best to pretend they weren't there during, and disappeared just afterward. Harry was not the only one to notice this.

"Where's she running off to?" Ron said loudly.

Harry shrugged. "Let's check the library."

Oddly enough, she wasn't there, as they discovered several minutes later. They checked the common room, the Great Hall, the Room of Requirement (more on accident than anything; they'd gone past its hidden location a few times when its door suddenly appeared), and even Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, whose sole occupant proceeded to drift in Harry's wake for a bit before returning to her U-bend.

"Can I make the toast at your wedding reception?" Ron goaded him.

"Shut up."

They finally abandoned the search, and were walking into the Great Hall to inhale a few bites of something before next period, when they found Hermione already seated at the Gryffindor table, her head down, bolting down food.

"Hermione!" Harry called as they approached. She started, dropping some of whatever was on her fork into her glass.

"Hi!" she said, sounding a tad over-cheerful. A bit of sauce was clinging to her cheek. Harry motioned his finger across the corresponding spot on his face, and she blushed and wiped it off with her napkin.

"Are you avoiding us?" Ron asked bluntly.

"No," she said, not meeting his eyes. "I've just been for a walk around the castle. I wanted to see the grounds, get some fresh air."

"Come off it," he persisted. "What're you really...?"

But she was already striding out of the hall, leaving behind a plate of half-finished macaroni and cheese.

"What's she playing at?" Ron said a few minutes later between bites of a pastrami sandwich. "We've got Care of Magical Creatures next, and she's on about getting fresh air."

As they walked through the grass toward Hagrid's hut, they saw Hermione conversing with him. He looked up when he noticed the movement.

"All righ', Harry?" he called out cheerily. "Ron?"

"All right," Ron called back, grinning. But even as he said this, Hermione moved away from Hagrid and closer to a cluster of crates, presumably to investigate their contents. Harry couldn't help agreeing with Ron; she was determined to talk to them as little as possible.

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"It's been nice chatting with you," Ron said loudly as they attempted to keep pace with her on the way back to the castle, and failed. "See you next term, then?"

"What d'you reckon?" Neville asked, nursing a slight scratch the kneazle he'd been feeding had given him.

"Who knows?" Harry said as they reached the heavy oak doors into the castle. Of course, he did know, but a promise was a promise.

As they queued for Defense Against the Dark Arts, however, Hermione walked up to them and said "Hello" somewhat formally.

"Don't give us that!" Ron snapped.

"What's the matter?" she asked innocently.

"What's the matter with YOU?" he bellowed. "You ruddy well know you've been ignoring us since last night! What's got into you that you can't talk to us anymore?"

As he watched Hermione begin to squirm, a sudden idea came to Harry.

"Look," he began heatedly, winking so as only Hermione could see it, "I'm sorry I called you that, but I swear I didn't mean to! Besides, 'Hermy' is a right cute little nickname, and I'd appreciate it if you quit acting like such a prat about it!"

To his relief, she caught on as soon as he'd said "Hermy". She winked back, then acted as if she was thinking it over for a moment before half-shouting a response.

"Well, I accept your apology, then, but I'll thank you never to make that mistake again!"

Ron stared blankly.

"That's what all this was about? I've been put through all this grief over a NICKNAME?!"

"I don't want YOU using it, either!" she yelled, rounding on him. "It's revolting, and I don't appreciate it!"

"Hermie'?" Neville whispered in Harry's ear.

Then the door clicked open of its own accord, and they began filing into the classroom, Ron shaking his head and muttering something like "off her nut". As they neared the entrance, Harry felt a hand squeeze his. He looked to his left, and saw Hermione beaming at him, mouthing the words "thank you".

As they sat waiting for the lesson to begin, she slipped him a bit of parchment under their desks. Taking great care not to let anyone see it (particularly Ron), and pretending to be browsing his textbook, he read the hastily scribbled note:

That was brilliant! But did you have to tell everybody that awful nickname? Anyway, I owe you one, and I mean it. First Hogsmeade weekend, bring your cloak.

Harry crumpled it up and shoved it into his pocket. He could only guess it meant she was going to tell him what was up then. It made sense; the village of Hogsmeade had a few more places to hold a private conversation, ones that most Hogwarts students wouldn't know about. But why must he wait that long to find out, and why on earth did she want him to bring the Invisibility Cloak?

Before he could develop any further hypotheses, there was a POP!, a flash of fire, and Professor Dumbledore was suddenly seated behind the teacher's desk, a brilliant crimson feather in his hat.

"Good afternoon, class," he said pleasantly. A few students returned the greeting.

"Today, a simple proficiency quiz. Nothing to worry about," he soothed, preemptively stifling the collective groan before it began, "just a test to assess what we already know so I can pick up from there... though I do already have a general idea of what you're capable of. Begin."

And with that, rolls of parchment appeared on the desks in front of them. As the quills began scratching away, Harry smiled. He was quite sure most of the class would get high marks, due to their little club last year. He unscrewed his inkwell, dipped his quill in it, and started in.

iiii

The first two weeks of term went rather quickly and with little incident; Harry's death was predicted predictably in Divination, which was now being joint-taught by Professors Trelawny and Firenze; the dog he'd been attempting to Transfigure into a chair barked when sat in, but was otherwise fine; Harry actually managed to scrape a decent grade on a Memory-Sharpening Draught (mostly due to sampling Hermione's before his second attempt); and most importantly, Hermione was acting normally again, hounding them about their already-mounting load of homework and wondering what they'd done with the planner books she'd given them.

"Mine's propping up a wobbly table leg at the Burrow," Ron confessed to him when she was out of earshot.

Without the presence of Angelina Johnson, the duty of Quidditch captain had somehow ended in Ginny's lap. With Harry and his Firebolt back in the Seeker position, she was now the lead - and only - Chaser, and she was very anxious about the upcoming team tryouts.

"What if no one good shows up?" she said to him one afternoon in their third week. "We already got stuck with Kirke and Sloper, Merlin knows we can't handle any more crappy players. The Cup may rest on your shoulders."

He idly asked Seamus and Dean if they'd be trying out, but they already had positions of sorts.

"We're talking over for Lee Jordan as commentators!" Seamus said, grinning. "McGonagall asked us last week!"

And so Harry found himself heading toward the Charms classroom, mind filled with dread for the future of the Gryffindor Quidditch team, when he ploughed headlong into Cho Chang.

"Watch- oh, hi," she said, noticing who'd almost killed her.

"Cho! Sorry, er, my fault, I wasn't-"

"It's okay, you don't have to..."

She trailed off, looking at the floor.

"Speaking of apologies, Harry..."

"Yeah... I got your letter."

"I really am, though," she said, her eyes pleading. "I was being so silly about you and Hermione Granger."

"We've only ever been friends, you know."

"Yeah, so she said."

His brow furrowed. "She said...?"

"She sent me an owl over the summer... said she kept thinking about us, you and I, and how things had ended last year. Said she wanted to set the record straight and all."

Harry smiled. He guessed that both him and Hermione telling her they weren't snogging at every spare moment had more impact than just one of them telling her. The letter had done the trick, alright.

"That one squares us," he muttered.

"Hmm?"

"Nothing, nevermind. So, er... have a good summer?"

"It was okay. Look," she said, shifting uneasily. "We both may have said some things we regret last year, and-"

"Yeah," Harry said, scuffing the ground with his shoe. "I was acting like a git last year, wasn't I?"

"No, no, I was the-"

"Come on, we can find better things to fight over than who's the bigger idiot," he said with a grin.

Cho beamed at him. "Start fresh, then?" She held out her hand.

"Sure."

As he took her hand to shake it, she suddenly darted forward and pecked him on the cheek, then scampered down the hall, failing to suppress a fit of giggles.

"I'll be damned," he whispered to no one in particular.

"Lucky devil," a painting behind him grumbled.

iiii

Ron's puzzled frown gave way to a wide grin the moment Harry had finished explaining why he was late to Charms.

"Sly git," he said, laughing. "You even managed to keep her eyes from leaking this time!"

"Get out of it," he muttered as he ducked Ron's attempt to tousle his hair. Still, he couldn't help grinning himself. "Anyway, I owe it all to our resident bookworm, here." He turned to where Hermione was half-concentrating on a Luminescence Charm. She'd managed to make the Christmas bauble in front of her glow five minutes ago, and was doing and undoing it over and over out of boredom.

"Hey, you," Harry said, prodding her shoulder.

She jumped and looked up at him. "Harry! When did you get here?"

"Just a few minutes ago. Anyway, thanks."

"For what?"

"For Cho."

A satisfied smile stretched across her features. "I was hoping my letter would do some good. Glad to see she's come to her senses."

"Evidently, she still insists on calling you 'Hermione Granger', though," Ron said, rolling his eyes. "So as not to confuse you with all the other Hermiones at school."

"Why IS she so formal with me?" She poked her lips with the tip of her wand thoughtfully. "I just don't understand it."

Ron shrugged, then his eyes suddenly shot wide. "Hermione, you really shouldn't-" He stopped, looking horrified. "Too late."

"What? What's the matter?"

Harry tried not to grin, but failed miserably. "D'you.. have a mirror on you?"

A worried look came over her as her hand shot into her bag, withdrawing a small make-up mirror after a few seconds. She tilted it, looking over her face, then nearly dropped it.

"OOH, Hermione, that lipstick is absolutely fabulous!" Parvati Patil called earnestly to her from a few desks down, her eyes shining. "May I borrow it, oh please, may I?"

Several students looked around, and many of them were quite startled to see Hermione's lips had not only turned an elegant powder blue, but were also glowing even brighter than the ornament on her desk.

"I look like I've been snacking on light bulbs!" she whispered to Harry and Ron.

"Please, Hermione?" Parvati insisted desperately. "I'll loan you any of my make-up you like!"

To Be Continued

Chapter Three: Dank Confessional

It seemed to Harry that the days flew by after this incident. Madam Pomfrey had assured Hermione that her shining lips were nothing serious, and that they would go back to normal on their own eventually; in the week that had taken, she'd had to endure ridicule from Pansy Parkinson, and the rest of the girls in the school begging her for the spell she'd used. Cho smiled and waved at Harry every time they passed in the hall, which he supposed contributed to the quickened passage of time. That, combined with homework and rigorous Quidditch practices (Ginny, while a bit friendlier about it, turned out to be as much of a slavedriver as Oliver Wood had been), all but completely drove Hermione's secret from his mind. Or it did, that is, until the first Hogsmeade weekend of the term was upon them. As he was returning from another gruelling session on the pitch the night before, she stopped him in the common room.

"Don't forget your cloak," she said quietly, then waved brightly and turned toward the stairs to her dormitory.

"Where will we be... er, going?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow," she replied without a backward glance.

The helpless, confused feeling that the past weeks had so well buried returned in full force as he walked into his dorm and gently set his Firebolt next to his trunk. The knowledge that he would know what this was all about before night fell again did little to ease this.

As he was pulling on his pajamas, Ron dragged himself through the door.

"My dear sister's going to do us in," he grumbled, letting his Cleansweep Eleven fall from his hand and flopping face-down on his bed.

"We have to break in our new Chasers, don't we?"

"We're still breaking in our terrible Beaters," came Ron's muffled voice. "Those two do more harm than good, really." He looked up at

Harry. "I suppose you and Cho will be running off to snog in that cafe tomorrow?"

Harry almost said "no," then thought better of it. "We'll see." It would make a perfect excuse to get away with Hermione, wherever they were going.

"Figures. I'll probably end up chugging butterbeer in The Three Broomsticks all day." Harry had a sneaking suspicion he would, if only to gaze longingly at Madam Rosmerta. "Well, night, then."

"Night."

But as he lay there in the semi-darkness, he found he could not fall asleep. It was like Christmas Eve at the Dursley's; anxiety as to what sort of bland, dreadful gift he'd be receiving the next day permeated his thoughts. Eventually, forcing himself to dwell on the knowledge that he would know soon enough, he managed to drift off, dreaming dreams of Quidditch, in which the Golden Snitch had blue, glittering lips that kept squealing, "Don't forget your cloak!"

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The wind was howling, whipping at the hems of their robes, as Harry, Ron and Hermione walked down the path to Hogsmeade. Ron was flipping a Sickle like a gangster in an old movie, save for the fact that he kept dropping it.

"Bloody wind," he mumbled, dropping it again.

As he bent to pick it up, Harry gave Hermione a significant look and patted his bag. She nodded slightly, pressing a finger to her lips briefly as Ron jogged to catch up to them.

"So," he said, finally pocketing the coin in defeat, "where to first?"

"Honeydukes?" Hermione shrugged. "Always a good place to start."

As they entered the sweetshop, Ron made for the large barrel of Fizzing Whizbees, and Hermione pulled Harry behind a stack of Chocolate Frog cases.

"In a bit," she whispered. "Let's... just enjoy ourselves for a while."

Harry felt a twinge of annoyance, but nodded. After all, they didn't get to visit Honeydukes terribly often, and he did want to stock up on sweets.

They made quite the day of it, spending nearly an hour in Honeydukes, and even longer in Zonko's, which, to Harry's amazement, was now carrying a few of Fred and George's products, including their superb fake wands and their infamous Skiving Snackboxes. They were just heading down the road toward The Three Broomsticks when Ron dropped the bag of things he'd bought.

"Cripes," he spat, bending down to shovel things back into it. Harry started forward to aid him, but Hermione hurriedly pulled him down a nearby alley.

"Now, hurry!"

"What-"

"The cloak!"

Glancing around, Harry whipped it out of his bag, throwing it over both of them. She led him down the street away from the tavern. He felt a pang as he heard Ron call, "Harry? Hermione?"

"Why can't we tell him, too?" he whispered.

But she merely shushed him and continued doggedly down the High Street, passing shops, students, and townsfolk. He realized the bustling village was giving way to lush, vivid country, and then he saw a familiar stile.

"Are we going to the-"

"Shh!" But she nodded.

Indeed, they carefully climbed over the stile, up the side of the craggy mountain beyond, and into the cozy cave where Sirius and Buckbeak had hidden nearly two years ago.

"Okay," Harry gasped, throwing the cloak and his bag in a corner. He took a moment to catch his breath, then continued. "We're here, I suppose."

She nodded, panting herself.

"So, out with it."

But Hermione did not speak. She walked slowly over to the cave wall, turned, and sat down, her chest still heaving. Harry hesitated, then sat down in front of her. A few moments passed in silence as they rested from their tedious climb, Harry staring at her expectantly, Hermione staring resolutely at the floor to his right.

"Hermione-

"I can't."

Harry blinked, then felt the annoyance he'd buried flaring up. "But we came all the way-

"I can't do it, I just... I just can't."

"Look," he said louder than he meant to, nostrils flaring. "I'm getting sick of this! I'm up a wall, and you're backing out! Either tell me what's gotten into you, or-

"Or what?" she said in a small voice, looking up at him. "You won't speak to me again?"

"Maybe." He didn't mean it in the slightest, but being kept in the dark was beginning to grate on his nerves.

"That's exactly what I've been afraid of. That you won't want to speak to me again."

Harry felt his brow knit. "Why-"

"Oh, Harry, let's just forget it!" she moaned desperately. "We can go catch up with Ron, he's probably-"

"No." His voice was adamant. "I want to know what's been bugging you... before I end up in the Closed Ward."

She gazed at him for a long moment, and by the look on the half of her face he could see in the dim light from the narrow cave mouth, she had completely changed her mind about telling him. What she finally said, however, was the opposite of how she appeared to be feeling.

"I guess I have no choice now."

The defeat in her voice was so painful to Harry's ears that he almost didn't want to know. But curiosity and concern won out, and he stayed silent.

"Swear to me." Her eyes had returned to the floor.

"I already-"

"I need you to say it again. If anyone else were to ever hear what I am about to tell you, I would leave Hogwarts, and I daresay you would never find me."

Harry could not believe she had just said such a thing. As important as school was to Hermione...

"You... you haven't... killed anyone, have you?"

To his surprise, she laughed - the same empty laugh as she had done on the train. "No, of course not. It's not really something I've done."

"Then have you found out something? I mean, something you ought not to have?" His muscles tensed. "Is someone after you?"

She shook her head, still smiling in a very sad way.

"Are you... pregnant?"

Her head jerked up indignantly. "No! Good LORD, no!"

"Well, I am sort of grasping at straws, here," he said irritably.

"I'm sorry." It wasn't a half-hearted, dismissive apology; she was staring at him hard, and every syllable increased the obvious strain etched into her face. "I truly am sorry, Harry, you'll never know how horribly, desperately so. Just... please, you've got to say it again, I... I need to hear it."

Harry looked at her for a moment, not knowing what to say. Then, with a decent amount of cheek, he slapped a hand over his heart. "I, Harold James Potter, do hereby solemnly swear that if I ever were to reveal that which I am about to hear, I will march straight into the Forbidden Forest and call the first centaur I see an 'ignorant mule'." He dropped the hand. "Good enough?"

She smiled again, and this time a twinkle of amusement crept into her sad eyes. "Good enough." Then the smile fell away as if it had never been there. She breathed deeply, undoubtedly steeling herself for what she was about to do.

"This has nothing to do with anyone else, and as I've said, it's nothing of my doing. It's about me and me alone." She paused. "I'm not exactly who you think I am."

"What... what do you mean?"

"Oh, I've always been Hermione Granger... I'm not some Slytherin spy who's been drinking Polyjuice Potion for five years or any rubbish like that. I've just... never been completely honest about who I am... what I am."

As she paused again, Harry ventured a guess. "Are you a... morphmagus?"

"No... but you're closing in on it. As with metamorphmagi, this is how I've been since the day I was born."

"Please, just tell me, already! The suspense is going to snuff me before you finish!"

At this, to his utter bewilderment, she burst into tears. Unsure of what to do, he raised a hand gingerly toward her arm, but she jerked it out of his reach.

"Don't touch me."

"You... you didn't want me to touch you on the train, either... even though you never said."

She merely nodded, her hands covering her face as she cried.

"But... why? Have you been..." It was such an ugly thing to say, but it had to be asked. "Has someone been... taking advantage of you?"

But she shook her head. Harry's mind was now completely blank.

"Harry," she finally breathed, attempting to stem the flow of her tears. "You know that some people are born... different, right?"

"Yeah, sure, but-"

"That's me. I was born with a birth defect. Even though my parents and... and the doctors always told me it wasn't a defect, that's what it is, really."

"Well, it wasn't a mental defect, as you're dead clever." He'd said this in hopes of cheering her up, and it seemed to work to some degree; she lowered her hands and flashed him a watery smile.

"Oh, Harry..." She put a hand on his cheek, which he didn't know what to think of. "You're a true friend. I don't deserve such a friend, but... I don't want to lose you."

He patted her hand tentatively. "You won't. I swear to that, as well." He squirmed indecisively, then said, "Look, I can tell you really don't want to do this. Maybe we can leave it for another-"

"No." She lowered her hand, placing it with the other one in her lap. "I've gone this far. Now or never."

As "never" seemed quite long to worry over this, Harry said nothing.

"I was born with a certain... irregularity. The common practice with this uncommon defect is to perform surgery straight after birth... but my parents, you see, are far too guilty of agapé to stand for that."

"Agappy?"

"Ah-GAH-Pay," she sounded out slowly. "Unconditional love. They didn't care what I looked like, or how badly I was disfigured... I was their daughter, and they loved me anyway. How stupid of them," she added bitterly.

"But you look fine to me."

She grinned wryly. "Not been using your cloak to slip into the girls' bath, I see. Good boy, Harry."

"I'm not a bloody pervert!"

She laughed, a bit more joyfully this time, but not for very long. Still smiling, as if it would make what she was about to say less painful, she suddenly blurted it out.

"I'm a hermaphrodite."

To Be Continued

Chapter Four: Diagram Of Agape

These words might have had more impact on Harry if he'd known what they meant. "A herfarmywhatsis?"

Hermione squirmed uncomfortably. "Shoot. I hadn't counted on this."

"On what?"

"On you being a moron, that's what!"

"HEY-!"

"Sorry," she said quickly. "I didn't mean that. It's just... I forgot that most people don't know what they are, or that they even exist. WE exist," she corrected herself.

"Are you telling me that you're some kind of... of overgrown faerie or something?"

"Stop it," she said, almost laughing again. "You sound like Ron."

"Ron..." He peered at her quizzically. "Why couldn't you tell him you're a hermattything?"

Her expression fell slightly. "Dear Ronald... I truly hope you understand this once I've explained it, but... Ron, on the other hand-"

"-can be a bit thick," he finished for her.

"If I thought he could actually handle this, I'd tell him straight away, really I would," she said, her voice cracking. "It's hard enough telling you."

"Because I'm as thick as he is."

She made an impatient "tuh!" before continuing. "Harry, you're the only one I could tell. I feel... I thought you could identify with me, because you know. You know what it's like to be a bit different from everyone else."

She had him there. "I never asked to be the Boy Who Lived."

"And I never asked for this." For some reason, she gestured to her lap.

"For what, a fanny?"

"That's not all that's down there," she said darkly.

"What ARE you on about?!"

"Let's just say a hermaphrodite is where the lines blur... where gender isn't black and white."

Harry was vexed for a brief moment, then what she was inferring suddenly hit him. "Are you saying you-"

"Both." Her voice was shaking again. "One sitting comfortably on top of the other. Isn't it grand?"

If she hadn't been trying to tell him this for ages, if she didn't look as if she were about to fall apart, Harry would have been absolutely sure she wasn't being serious.

"You're... not having me on... are you." It was a statement rather than an actual question.

"Believe me, if I was, I'd be positively giddy."

As he feebly tried to wrap his brain around what she was telling him, he noticed tears were streaming down the visible side of her face.

"But... but that's not possible."

"I assure you it's quite possible."

"No, no," He became dimly aware that he was beginning to rave. "It can't be, it's not-"

"Harry-"

"Just tell me you're pulling my leg, tell me this is some great con-"

"DOES THIS LOOK LIKE A CON?!"

An absolute horror filled Harry as Hermione sprang to her feet, thrust her hands under her blouse, and yanked down her jeans in one swift motion.

In the instant it was happening, he had a feeling that what he saw next would be burned into his permanent memory, never to be dislodged. In a moment that seemed to stretch on forever, he stared, open-mouthed and thunderstruck, at the unnatural sight so blatantly presented before him, then tore his eyes away.

"Not pretty, is it?!" she demanded.

"Pull your knickers up."

"I'm a freak, aren't I? AREN'T I?!"

"Please, pull them up."

His eyes still squeezed shut, his heart pounding in his throat, he heard her do so, then slide down the cave wall. He cautiously turned to look at her, and found she was shuddering with anguished sobs.

"Now listen-"

But as he said it, she leapt up and bolted for the exit. Luckily, Harry had already been stretching his arm out in comfort, and as he had much quicker reflexes and was fleet of foot, he caught her arm before she reached the cave mouth.

"Let go!" she wailed.

"No."

"Please, just let me go!" She was jerking wildly, desperate to tear away from his grasp, to escape.

"I won't!"

Her body slackened, and she sank to the floor, racking sobs issuing from the mad tangle that had been her hair. Harry did not let her go, but knelt next to her, pulling her into an unfaltering hug.

"Don't-"

"You need it," he cut across her softly.

After fighting weakly for a few moments, she embraced him, her hands nearly cutting into his back, weeping freely into his shoulder.

He wasn't sure exactly how long they stayed like that; somehow, it was an instant and an age. The trembling person in his arms seemed so forlorn and vulnerable, and he could think of no great words of comfort. At some point, however, she pulled away from him, wiping her face.

"Now I've got your shirt all wet," she blubbered. "I'm s-so worthless."

"Now, listen," he began again, more softly this time. "I can't deny that finding this out is... well, a bit weird."

She made a noise halfway between a laugh and a sob.

"I don't really know what to think about it, to be honest. But... Hermione, I don't want you thinking stupid things like I hate you, or that I don't want to talk to you ever again. So... please, just don't run off or anything."

She pushed the hair out of her face as she looked up at him, mouthing wordlessly.

"I... I don't want to lose you, either."

Fresh tears welled up, and her lip began to tremble. "Harry..."

She flung her arms around him again, hiccoughing into his shoulder. He patted her on the back for a moment, then stood quickly.

"Right, well, let's go catch up with Ron. He's probably sulking at the bar as we speak."

She stared up at him, her arms having fallen around his leg after he had risen. "Wh... how can you be so casual about this?"

"It's like I said, I really don't know what to think. It might take my thick head some time to sort that out. But meantime, we're still mates... right?" He flashed her an uncertain grin.

She just gaped at him for a long moment, then slowly grinned through her tears. "I... I can't believe how well you're taking this... it's so much more than I could ever have hoped, it..."

Harry laughed quietly as he held out a hand to help her up. Some part of him knew he was acting like a git, but he hoped it would make it seem as if he wasn't as startled and unnerved as he really was. "Quite the pair, aren't we? The parselmouth Boy Who Almost Snuffed It and the... what's that wonky word again?"

"Hermaphrodite," she said with supreme distaste as she steadied herself on her feet.

"Right... what a mouthful. Hang on," he said, something dawning on him. "Is that why your parents named you-"

"Yes, actually. Well, the name comes from Shakespeare, and my mother's a fan of the theatre. The minute she found out what I was, the name was being penned on my birth certificate."

"Don't say 'what'. You're not an animal."

To Harry's semi-horror, she looked like she was about to start crying again. He cast around for something less likely to get her going.

"I think I get why you hated Grawp's nickname," he said as he stuffed the cloak into his bag and shouldered it.

"Well, partly that, but mostly because Grawp frightens me a tad." She shuddered as she wiped her eyes again. "If I never see that hulking monolith again..."

"Don't blame you. Well, let's get out of here. We've been gone for..." He checked his watch. "Damn, an hour and a half!"

"What?!" She pulled his wrist toward her unceremoniously. "Gosh, now I'm glad I didn't try to tell you on the train - I wouldn't have had the time!"

"I hate to admit it, but I agree. Let's be quick, now."

"It's too bad I gave the Time-Turner back to Professor McGonagall," she said as they hurriedly clambered down the slope. "We could just walk up behind Ron five minutes after we left and say we saw something interesting in a shop window."

"What ARE we going to tell him? I could say I went off with Cho somewhere..."

"I could just go back to the castle and say I felt ill," she muttered as they jumped the stile.

"I suppose so. That the plan, then?"

"It's all I can think of. I was so worried about whether or not you'd end up loathing me I didn't think about proper alibis."

He grabbed her shoulder reassuringly as they walked back toward the village, and she smiled fondly at him, her eyes still shining with unshed tears. She suddenly stopped as Dervish and Banges came into view.

"Can I... borrow your cloak? Be a bit harder to use our alibi if I ran into anyone on the way to the castle."

"By all means." She pulled it out of his bag, whirled it around herself, and vanished from view.

"I'll stow it in my trunk until I can get it back to you," the air said.

"I trust you," he said, grinning.

"And Harry?"

"Yeah?"

There was a long pause, then she whispered "Cheers" before he heard receding footfalls.

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"Where the bloody hell have you two-"

Ron broke off, looking around him. "Where's Hermione?"

"She said she wasn't feeling well," Harry said, sitting down at the table with his butterbeer. He wasn't lying, after all; she had said "I felt ill", even if he knew she was concocting a cover story at the time.

"Back up to the castle, then." He stared at Madam Rosmerta for a moment before he looked back at Harry. "Hang on a tick, where'd you go?"

Harry flashed him a wicked smile.

"Oh. Well, you did a good job of wiping all the lipstick off."

They both laughed, then Ron sighed and set his tankard down. "I've been so bored I was actually asking Luna about that Crumple-Snack thing."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "And what did you learn?"

"Like I could tell you. I just wanted something to do." He frowned, returning his gaze to the curvacious proprietor. "I need a woman."

"You and Luna seemed to be getting on fine."

"Get stuffed," he said without enthusiasm. "I meant a girl worth having who's not a nutter, like you've done."

"Hope you can find one that gives you nearly as much grief, then."

Ron snorted. "Point taken. Well, it's getting late, we'd better go before McGonagall and Filch come stalking through town after us. Besides, it's threatening rain."

As they trudged up the rapidly-darkening path and away from Hogsmeade, Harry couldn't help wondering how right Hermione was not to tell Ron about this; he had as much right to know. Then again, he was as unsure as Hermione was of how well Ron would take something like that.

He still wasn't quite sure how to take it, himself. Someone he'd always been unquestionably sure was a girl had turned out to be a bit of both. As she had dropped her pants, an overwhelming wave of nausea had swept him, but now that the moment had long passed and he could sort it out, he realized that it was less that the sight was vile or disgusting, and more that the concept of a hermaphrodite was so new to him, and there he was being shown firsthand before he'd really had a chance to understand it. There was also the matter that he simply had no desire to see anyone's wanger, save his own. But he knew she hadn't taken any pleasure in showing him - she was quite angry and upset, really - and due to that he did not resent her for it. She had wanted to prove to him she was being truthful, and that had done it, all right.

At that moment, he keeled forward and pitched onto the ground. Ron let out a yelp, then stooped over him.

"What, what is it?!"

"My stupid scar... it's- AAAGH!!!" Harry seized, clutching his forehead and trying not to thrash too wildly.

Ron glanced around desperately for help, but there was no one within sight. He bent back over Harry and laid a hand on his shoulder.

As Harry looked up at Ron, at the panicked face of his best friend, a warmth shot through him. Instantly, the pain vanished, leaving dull echoes within his skull. He shakily rose, Ron half-supporting his weight.

"What was that all about, mate?"

"I think you know," he replied, tapping his scar.

"Yeah, but what was it about?"

Harry closed his eyes. "Frustration. Voldemort wanted... he needed..." He blinked. "It's gone."

"What's gone, what's he taken?"

"No, I mean the vision... I've lost most of it now."

"Oh... so, he was frustrated?"

"Yes. There was something he'd been lusting after for some time, but now he can't get it... or it's been destroyed, or something."

"I'm not too reassured by the 'or something'."

"Me, either." His brow furrowed. "This one wasn't very clear. Not very clear at all... and I'm not sure if that makes me feel better or worse."

"But it's over, right?"

"Yeah."

As they resumed their trek up to the castle, Harry's insides were discontented. He had managed to push Voldemort from his mind over the past months, had miraculously gone without any strange visions or waking up with that prickling in his scar... and now here he was,

right back where he'd left off. If Voldemort was enraged, that could only be something very good... or very bad.

Any further thoughts than this were interrupted by Ron's jab in the ribs.

"I'll meet up with you in the common room, then."

And as he trudged off toward the front doors of the castle, Harry suddenly realized Cho was walking toward him.

"Evening," she said, smiling pleasantly. "I didn't see you in the village—are you alright? You look miserable."

He realized he was still half-dwelling on what had just happened. He hitched a smile onto his face and said, "Nah, I'm fine, just a bit preoccupied."

She peered into his face concernedly for a few seconds. "Is this about Quidditch?"

"Er, yeah," he said, seizing on the subject. "Our newer team members are shaping up to be a ruddy disappointment."

"So I heard." She patted him on the shoulder gingerly. "Hope you can get them trained in time for the first match."

Harry nodded, and he felt a few raindrops land on his face. "You guys are up against Slytherin first go, though."

"I think we've got a fighting chance this year," she said, grinning wickedly. "You'd better watch your bum, Potter."

"I'd rather watch—"

Luckily for him, a very loud thunderclap cut off the flirtatious remark he had been unable to prevent himself from saying. Seconds later, the skies opened up and the rain began to fall in sheets.

"Let's get inside!" Cho shouted.

Harry simply nodded, and squinting hard with his hand over his eyes, he followed her as she raced over the lawns toward the front doors. Suddenly, she disappeared from view, and before he knew what was happening, he had tripped and landed on top of her sprawled form.

"Sorry!" he said loudly over the noise of the storm, rolling off of her and trying not to think about just how soft of a cushion she had made.

"No worries!" She was laughing as she propped herself up on her elbow to look at him, wiping mud from her face.

Their eyes locked, and Harry had a fluttery feeling in the pit of his stomach. Sweat beaded on his forehead, mixing with the rain running down from his hair. Cho was leaning toward him, and he was debating over which impulse to follow: the one to lean back, and the one to lean in. But before he knew what was happening, she had slipped an arm around his waist and up his back. Abandoning all sanity, he shut his eyes and eased forward...

To Be Continued

Chapter Five: The Romeo Punk

"Finally, you- WHAT IN BLAZES?!"

Harry stomped through the common room, walked resolutely over to the squashy armchairs by the fire and slammed his bag down inches from Ron's feet, spilling the contents. He just as resolutely ignored the stares and mutters of the other Gryffindors.

"What's happened to you, mate?!"

"Slytherin's what happened!" He threw himself into the chair sulkily.

"They threw you in the mud?"

"Well, no..."

"But they did turn your hair orange, right?"

"Yeah, great bloody gits." Harry pulled a blade of grass out of his ear and flicked it into the floor.

"But... what in hell...?!"

"Okay, so Cho and I were having a nice little conversation," he said, his breathing shallow from rage. "Then-"

"What in the world happened?!" Hermione said as she strode over to them.

"I thought you were sick," Ron said skeptically.

Hermione glanced at Harry before replying. "It think it was just a stomachache... too much from Honeydukes. But what happened to you?!"

"Well, as I was telling Ron, I was talking to Cho on the grounds, and it started to pour bucketfulls. Well, we legged for the doors, but tripped and, er..."

Ron was on the edge of his chair. "And, and?!"

"Well, er, she was in front, and I was right on her heels, you see..."

Hermione giggled.

"Anyway, we were... sharing something of a... moment," he said, turning a brilliant shade of crimson. Hermione tried to hide her fits behind her hands while Ron broke into the widest grin he'd ever managed. "Don't start goading me, I've had enough of it, already."

Ron's smile slipped. "I suppose this is where the Slytherins come in."

"Malfoy and his sodding cronies came stomping out from who knows where, and start whooping and making cat calls. Nobody can take the mickey out of you quite like a Slytherin."

"So what happened?"

"Malfoy yelled something insulting that I couldn't hear over the thunder, and Crabbe and Goyle guffawed on cue. I called out that he should get knotted, and a Stunner flew past my shoulder; Cho screamed, and my blood went boiling. I sent a Reductor Curse their way-"

"HARRY!!!" Hermione half-shouted.

"I didn't point it AT them," he said impatiently. "Anyway, it hit the ground next to Goyle and he fell over... that's when Malfoy hit me with whatever did this," he finished, pointing to his neon-hued scalp.

"Was Cho okay?" Hermione asked anxiously.

"Yeah, thank God. I probably would've used the Cruciatus on Malfoy if he'd done her any harm."

"One of these days that flid'll go too far for the teachers, even," Ron growled.

"He did tonight," Harry said.

"What d'you mean?"

"I mean Snape came out of nowhere, and actually punished him."

"WHAT?!" they shouted in unison.

"Usually it's me that's the last one to fire off something when he shows up, but Malfoy wasn't so lucky this time, and Snape had no choice. He took ten points from both our houses and gave us each a detention... and five points from Ravenclaw, just because Cho was there."

Ron was dumbfounded, but Hermione only nodded.

"He may not be fair, but he still follows the rules, doesn't he? I've been telling you he's trustworthy all along, and-"

"Give over, will you?" Ron interrupted. "He still gave Harry a detention, even though he was just defending himself against Malfoy!"

"Children," Harry said sternly. Hermione, her mouth open and eager, fell silent. "Thank you. Now I think I've had quite enough excitement for the day-" he glanced at her briefly "-and I definitely need to get this grime off."

"Scourgify!" Hermione said. She had been withdrawing her wand as Harry was looking at his robes in disgust. They were instantly clean.

He flashed her a smile. "Thanks." Yawning widely, he stood and walked toward the dormitory stairs, patting Hermione on the shoulder as he went. "Night."

"Night," she said quietly.

He had been laying there in his pajamas for several minutes, staring at the canopy over his bed and trying not to think about how many strange things had happened that day, when Ron came in and began to change clothes.

"Some rotten day, eh?" Harry sighed.

"Yeah," he muttered in reply. "At least you got to snog someone."

"Before I nearly got Stunned and my hair turned orange!"

"I'd trade orange hair for a bit of fun with a bird like Cho."

"You've already got orange hair!" Harry said, sitting up. "Besides, it's not like Cho and I are having it off, it was just a kiss!"

Ron grinned and shook his head. "Listen to you, 'Cho and I'."

Harry glowed like a stoplight.

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He could never quite figure out how they'd managed it, but as he went down to breakfast the following morning, everyone had already been fully informed of the events on the rain-soaked lawn. The boys kept elbowing him and applauding. The girls kept pointing and giggling. And the Slytherins looked absolutely livid at the supposed injustice of Malfoy getting detention. Malfoy himself glared when Harry walked across the Great Hall.

"I don't see why I'm to be punished for your acting like a Hoover," he jeered.

"Jealous," Ginny muttered, steering Harry to the table and sitting him down. While Harry appreciated her support, he was also a bit annoyed at her thinking she had to protect him from Malfoy.

"The whole school's talking about your little romp in the rain," Ron said, a knowing grin on his face. "Some of them even say you managed a hand up her jumper."

Harry felt his face grow hot again, and wondered if it (like his hair) would ever be allowed to resume its normal colour. "But I didn't-!"

"I know, mate," he said, shrugging. "Leastways, I figured you would have mentioned that."

"Have you heard? Evidently, our hands went down each other's knickers."

Harry turned to see Cho sitting down next to him. Mortification spread through him.

"I've tried setting them all straight, but they won't hear of it." She pulled a plate of eggs toward her. "It's much more fun to think you deflowered me in the middle of the grounds."

Harry gagged on his tea. "Now they're going so far as THAT?!"

"Oh, don't worry about it. When I don't turn up with a bun in the oven, they'll probably figure it out." She smiled impishly. "And I think your hair looks wicked."

Harry looked down into his teacup, wondering how possible it would be to crawl into it and die.

The month of November swam by in spurts. His brilliant orange mop, a constant reminder of the events on the rain-soaked lawns, was eventually dyed black again - unfortunately, not before Colin Creevey had taken dozens of colour photographs. His detention, sweeping out the Owlery without the use of magic, had thankfully not been the same one Draco Malfoy had been given, as if he'd actually had to stand next to Malfoy doing manual labour for any amount of time, he'd probably have started trying to impale him with a mop.

Classes, tedious amounts of homework, and equally tedious Quidditch practices took up the greater part of his attention, but the sparse leisure time he did have was not enjoyable. All the days seemed the same; people relentlessly asking him how good Cho was (as if he knew), or if they had used a johnny. Others simply asked him how far he'd really gone, hoping to stop the rumours and spread the truth. Not that this seemed to do any good, though; most of the people seemed to want to believe the nastier stories rather than the dull truth that it was a simple kiss.

Gryffindor's first Quidditch match, against Hufflepuff, was a near disaster. The Slytherins had created an enormous banner portraying himself (complete with firey hair) and Cho, necking at an increasingly maddening speed, then stopping to gasp for air. Harry was so distracted he kept weaving in and out of his teammates, almost careening straight into Ron, whom was hovering in front of the center goalpost and hadn't noticed him because he was too busy watching the Quaffle. Eventually, Professor McGonagall destroyed it with a Severing Charm, and once the Harry and Cho tapestry had been divided in two (and the occupants looked quite forlorn at this), he managed to catch the Snitch after his fourth sighting, and Gryffindor won, 180 to 110.

Meanwhile, Harry had had little opportunity to think about Hermione's problem, due to an utter lack of time to do so. There was also the matter that they hadn't really had a one-on-one conversation since Hogsmeade; it was hard to do so when in school, especially when both individuals don't use the same bathroom or the same dormitory. But Harry made a point of it to pat her on the shoulder now and then, just to make sure she knew he hadn't forgotten, and that hadn't got around to hating her, yet.

Another thing that disgruntled him through November was the absence of visions. Since he'd collapsed on the Hogsmeade trail, his scar had not prickled once all month. It was unnerving, and made him suspect that Voldemort was plotting something devious... and any plan that took a month to concoct was something to be wary of.

But the students, oblivious to the fact that Harry had other things on his mind, continued to goad him over his would-be pokefest with Cho. It was mainly because of this that he lingered in the classroom after Defense Against The Dark Arts one afternoon, near the end of the month. Ron and Hermione shot him quizzical looks as they left, but Harry waved them on.

Dumbledore, obviously realizing that Harry wanted to speak to him, waved his wand to shut the door after the last student had exited.

"What's troubling you, dear boy?" he asked, his twinkling blue eyes at full attention.

"Well, sir, I erm... I was wondering if I could make an announcement to the school, as a whole."

"Ah." Dumbledore smiled, nodding slightly. "This will be about you and Miss Chang."

Harry's eyes snapped open. "You know-?"

"Of course. I would be a very dim headmaster, indeed, if I somehow neglected to overhear what's been on everyone's lips for four weeks. Since the start of this week, in fact, I've been almost expecting you to approach myself, or perhaps Professor McGonagall, with a plea such as this."

"But you... you don't believe them, do you, Professor?" Harry felt strangely uncomfortable with Dumbledore having heard that he was allegedly knobbing girls at random.

"I haven't believed one way or the other. Rumours are, after all, not the most trustworthy means of communication." Dumbledore inclined his head slightly. "But your actions speak volumes. They tell me you have not, in fact, been engaging in any... 'extracurricular activities', as it were."

Harry sighed with relief. "Then may I? Address the school, that is, sir."

Dumbledore chuckled softly. "I'm afraid I can't allow you to do that. It would be most disruptive, and would draw even more attention to the lie. The more attention you give a rumour, the more it thrives." He gave a small cough. "Not to mention that the content of what you would have to say would not, I daresay, be entirely school-appropriate. Therefore, I simply could not endorse such a message."

Harry glowered for a second, then sighed. He knew Dumbledore was right, but he still couldn't help wanting to just force everyone to hear him out...

"Before you go," Dumbledore said, interrupting his thoughts, "is there anything else you wish to mention?"

The vision. He hesitated, then realized that Dumbledore had most likely already used Legillimency to pick up on it.

"You probably already know."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows for a moment, then smiled. "Your mind grows keener every year, Harry. Yes, I am aware that you experienced pain in your scar upon your return from Hogsmeade. What did you see?"

"Nothing." He shrugged. "It was just a flash of emotion... Voldemort was all pissy because he couldn't get his hands on something. That's all I felt, I didn't see anything or anyone."

"I see." The headmaster nodded slightly. "Well, I'm sure that with his ranks severely reduced, that feeling will haunt him often."

"But that's another thing," Harry said, pacing now. "I haven't had any visions, or feelings, or anything else since then. I'm afraid that... that he's planning something. Something big."

Dumbledore's face fell, ever so slightly. He sat there, simply watching Harry for a few moments, then said, "If there will be nothing else, Harry? I don't want to tie you up."

Harry stopped pacing. He had the distinct impression, though he could be wrong, that Dumbledore was in some sort of hurry, and wanted to be rid of him so he could get on with whatever he needed to.

"Erm, yes. I mean, no. I mean... thank you, Professor." And with that, he picked his schoolbag up and hurried from the classroom. Even as he shut the door behind him, he heard the POP! and flash of fire that signified Dumbledore had used Fawkes to depart.

The days wore on into December, and the ridicule, while it diminished marginally, did not die out. Harry's mere presence in the halls now sparked it, and if he and Cho were seen together in any way, it rose to ridiculous levels. He had reached the boiling point, and he was going to make sure everyone knew it.

"LOOK," he shouted one day in the hall, whirling around at the sound of giggling, "I haven't been knobbing Cho in the library! Not in the Great Hall, not on the Quidditch pitch, not in the bathroom, and CERTAINLY not in McGonagall's office! In fact, WHEN and IF Cho and I ever bunk up, I will PERSONALLY send you an owl detailing the full account!!!"

"Well, thank you," Cho said, smiling bemusedly. "I would like to have that for my records."

Harry let out a gust of air, his fury instantly giving way to embarrassment. "Sorry." He wanted to try and get into that teacup again...

"It's okay." She looked down at the floor. "I've been having my share of it, as well. Some of the girls keep calling me... well, things I'd rather not repeat."

He looked up at her. For some reason, it had just now dawned on him that she probably wasn't enjoying this, either.

"Listen, Cho-"

"No, don't worry about me, I can handle it." She looked at him concernedly. "Better than you, it seems... I'm really sorry, if I'd known how they'd be behaving-"

"Don't apologize for that," Harry said, shaking his head. "Anything involving the Boy Who Almost Snuffed It-" He had been using this to refer to himself ever since the cave "-is an easy target for this kind of stuff. It's not your fault they're tainting something so..." He broke off.

Cho's face deepened a shade, and she lowered her voice. "It was nice, wasn't it?"

Harry tried not to grin, but his face rebelled against his brain. "Quite."

A gaggle of Cho's fellow Ravenclaws made kissing noises as they passed.

"Sod off!" she shouted after them, shaking her head. "And Ravenclaws are supposed to be so intelligent."

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As the days grew yet colder, the list for who was staying over Christmas went around, and this year, very few students signed it. To Harry's surprise, Ron and Ginny had also refrained.

"We're visiting Charlie in Romania," Ron said apologetically. "I asked if you could come along, but dad said 'no'. I guess they don't want you to be in the line of fire... er, no pun intended."

"No pun implied," Harry said, smiling through his disappointment.

Hermione was the only other Gryffindor to sign up. Neville was going home to spend Christmas with his gran (and, as only Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Hermione knew, visit his parents in the Closed Ward at St. Mungo's). Seamus and Dean were going home to visit their families, and most of the other Gryffindors had given the same reason. At breakfast, he asked Cho if any Ravenclaws had signed.

"Sorry, Harry," she said earnestly, "but I'm supposed to go with my parents to see my grandparents for the holidays. Luna's staying, though."

Somehow, this was not much consolation.

On the positive side, not a single Slytherin was staying this year. Harry wondered idly if Voldemort would be using Christmas to break them in as his new Death Eaters.

The very night this thought had bemusedly passed through his mind, his run of good luck was interrupted by another vision, one that made

his scar shriek in agony and woke him in a cold sweat. The vision was so simple, so straightforward... and yet so malevolent.

Dumbledore was not in his office the next day. He was almost relieved at not having to burden the headmaster with the information, but it seemed pertinent that he inform someone.

Unfortunately, the next person he ran into was the last he would've selected.

"Planting yourself in front of the gargoyle until your beloved Headmaster returns, Mr. Potter?" Professor Snape sneered, eyeing him with suspicion. Harry was still standing outside Dumbledore's office, thinking. "I'm afraid that will not be for a few days. If I were to return here in the night and find that you are still camped out on this spot, you will, of course, receive detentions."

Harry nodded and said "Yes, sir," mechanically. Then, as the Potions master turned to leave, he shouted, "Wait!"

"What is it, Potter?" He did not turn, the question issuing from a curtain of oily black hair.

"Professor..." He hesitated, but there was nothing else for it, now. As much as he despised him, there was a possibility Snape could help him - or at the very least, inform the Order. "I need to tell you something."

"Potter," he said loudly in a quite bored voice, "anything you may wish to tell me is undoubtedly trivial. I, on the other hand, have pressing matters to attend to, so if you please-"

"I've had a nice little dream," he cut in pointedly.

Snape turned, and his cold, dark eyes gave him a piercing glare, one he held for several lengthening seconds. "Be in my office in half an hour, and be certain this is no prank or ruse. There is enough on my mind without some child filling it with meaningless sputterings."

And with that, Snape whirled and stalked off.

iiii

"Well?"

When Harry had entered Snape's office, he had not noticed the Potions master was already seated behind his desk, fingertips pressed together in front of his oversize hooked nose. He jumped and spun around at the question.

"I told you not to waste my time, Potter. Be quick about this."

"Sir," he said, recovering, "last night, I had another vision."

Snape sighed in disgust. "Occlumency lessons, and for naught. Very well, what was the context of the vision?"

"I saw the back of a man," he said, gingerly sliding into the empty chair in front of the desk. "As he came closer - or I came closer, I suppose - he turned, and I saw it was Voldemort-"

"I see you still speak his name as if you were referring to your neighbourhood grocer," Snape said, his eyes narrowing.

"-and he was leering at me," he continued, as if Snape had never spoken. "He opened his mouth, and said, 'It won't be long, now, Potter.'"

Snape waited for more, but Harry just sat there.

"Is that it?"

"Yeah... then he started laughing that high, cold laugh of his."

An involuntary shiver passed through Snape, but other than this, he gave no more obvious reaction.

"Thank you for this colossal disappointment."

"But sir-"

"All you have told me is that he is readying for something. The Dark Lord is the most potent Dark wizard of our time, of COURSE he is readying. Such madmen are always plotting, scheming, and preparing for their next move.

"However, you have also shown me that he is still aware of your connection, and is continuing to exploit it. You have squandered all the knowledge I have taken the pains to try and drive through your thick cranium. Now, if you will kindly remove your useless derriere from my office..."

To Be Continued

Chapter Six: Hearth, Heart and Hogsmeade

Harry's temper was flaring so strongly as he stormed into Greenhouse Five that he was almost sure his hair would go back to that awful tangerine hue.

"What's got you so steamed?" Ron asked.

"Snape is a pig-headed, cold-hearted, arrogant greasy GIT!"

"Yeah, he is. Now what's got you so steamed?"

As he pulled on his dragonhide gloves and began dumping soil into his pot, he related what had just happened in Snape's office.

"I don't like the sound of it, Harry," Hermione whispered. "I mean, why does V-Voldemort - Ronald, you've dropped your eggs! - want you to know so badly that his plans have almost culminated?"

"Who gives a damn," Harry grumbled, too irked with Snape to concentrate on the vision.

iiii

Now that Hermione had spilled and Harry didn't have a sense of impending doom looming over him, his second trip of the term into Hogsmeade seemed quite cheerful and bright, even if it was colder and darker this time of year. As he, Ron and Hermione strolled down the High Street, Cho came up to them. Hermione said she and Ron had to buy new quills, and pulled the befuddled Weasley off toward Dervish and Banges.

"You really do have a good friend in Hermione Granger," Cho said, trying to suppress a giggle at Ron's vain attempts to escape Hermione's grip and return to where they were standing.

"I suppose I do," Harry said, a grin creeping onto his face.

Flatly refusing to reenter Madam Puddifoot's tea shop ever again, Harry suggested going to The Three Broomsticks. The bar's patrons

were sparse that day, and the two of them selected a table near the back.

"So," Cho said.

"Yeah." He sat there a moment, staring at her hands. "Er, why don't I get drinks... butterbeer?"

"Okay," she said brightly.

He returned with two tankards, setting one down in front of her.

"Nasty thing the Slytherins did to you," Cho said, taking a sip.

"Yeah, I was thinking it's too bad it wasn't Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw," he said. "It would've made it an even match-up; both of us would've been flying like a pissed hippogriff."

Cho laughed, her white teeth glinting briefly in the low light of the tavern. "I'd have been so unnerved I would've started chasing a Bludger."

The afternoon slipped away from them as the conversation strayed down many paths, including Quidditch, homework, Cho's family, Quidditch, the Dursleys (Harry did not remain on this track for long), Quidditch, and more Quidditch. The two of them were just in the middle of a good-natured dispute over the fairness of the Wronski Feint when they were rejoined by Ron and Hermione.

"Got your new quills, then?" Cho asked, a knowing smile playing at her lips.

"No, I'd forgotten I had loads of spares in my trunk," Hermione said, beaming at the two of them. "Slipped my mind completely."

"Well, I wish you would've thought harder," Ron said sulkily. "You took ages in there! And I don't even need a new quill, my old one works just fine!"

Harry hid his face behind his tankard.

iiii

All too quickly, it seemed, the vast majority of the students were packing trunks and readying to depart. With shouts of "Happy Christmas!", the students slowly filed out of the castle. As he stood in the foyeur, wistfully watching Cho's long black hair fluttering in the breeze as she descended the front steps, Ron clapped a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sure you, Hermione and Luna'll have a good time," he said unconvincingly. "I'll be sending a present, and so will mum. And there's always the teachers."

"Don't cry for me, Ronald Weasley," he sang to the tune of an awful song he'd once heard. Ron gave a groan that turned into a laugh, then waved and exited.

Harry and Hermione turned to look at each other, and an uncomfortable silence fell the instant the great oaken doors had banged shut. After all these weeks of fleeting winks and pats on shoulders, jovial conversations with their other friends and ignoring less pleasant topics, it seemed they would at last have to talk about it.

"So," she began.

"That's that, I guess."

"Want to borrow a copy of The Quibbler?" Luna asked as she walked over to them. "To pass the time, of course. Plenty of time to pass over Christmas."

"Thanks, maybe later," Harry said politely.

"Oh, let's go visit Hagrid," Hermione said. "That'll be nice."

"I'm going up and pet the owls," Luna said breezily as she headed for the marble staircase.

iiii

"Happy Christmas, you two!" Hagrid bellowed, pulling the door wide. "C'mon in, c'mon in!"

Harry and Hermione hastily obeyed, stomping their boots on his welcome mat and shaking snow from their hair. Hagrid's beetle black eyes were glittering, and a wide grin was hidden behind his thick, tangled beard. "All righ', then? What yeh been up ter?"

"Not much," Harry said, sitting in one of the large chairs at the equally large table.

"Sounds ter me like yeh've been up ter quite a bit," Hagrid said in a low voice, winking at him.

"If you're talking about that nonsense with me and Cho-"

But Hagrid was chortling loudly, slapping his knee. "Oh, don' get yer knickers in a twist! I know yeh wouldn' be thick enough ter go an' do tha' sorta thing at school; OUTSIDE, no less!" Hagrid winked again and elbowed him in the ribs, knocking the wind out of him. "But I do know you an' that Chang are gettin' on all righ'. Yeh could do far worse, y'know; she's quite a looker, eh?"

Despite the fact that Hermione was slightly affronted at such "guy talk", the three of them wiled away the afternoon, talking about any manner of things (Harry stubbornly steering the conversation away from his love life), sipping tea and pretending to enjoy his rock cakes (they avoided actually eating any of Hagrid's cooking, on the grounds that they may crack a tooth or end up in the hospital wing). Eventually, the sun began to set, and Hagrid shooed them out of the cabin.

"Well, the holidays are off to a nice enough start," Hermione said contentedly as they trudged toward the castle. Harry merely nodded in agreement, glancing behind him. The curtains of the cabin were drawn, and the firelight inside silhouetted Hagrid's massive bulk moving across the interior. Then he froze.

"I suppose now I could start in on my Arithmancy essay, or perhaps- Harry, what's up?" She backtracked a little to where he was standing, staring off into the Forbidden Forest.

"I thought I saw something moving in there."

They both peered into the dense trees, looking for any hint of beast or man within. They had only been at it for a few moments when they heard a voice from behind them.

"Ahh, Harry, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said cheerfully. "Good evening! Just going to visit our gamekeeper?"

"Erm," Harry said, slowly removing his gaze from the still trees. "Actually, just coming from there."

"I see. Well, I was just going down there for a private word, so I suppose it's just as well you're leaving, as we would've had to run you out, anyway."

Harry and Hermione smiled and said their goodnights, taking a brief moment to watch the headmaster stroll down the path toward the tiny hut.

"What did you see?" Hermione asked him as they reached the front doors.

"I don't know. I just saw movement, and a flash of eyes... then it was gone. I couldn't even tell what it was."

"So it could've been a wolf or a dog?"

"Or it could've been a person... or even one of Aragog's 'children'. I really don't know..."

As they reached the third floor, they ran into Luna, who was returning from the owlry. She had owl droppings in her hair and on the shoulders of her robes, and Hermione immediately magicked her clean.

"Thank you," she said, brushing her sleeve needlessly. "I was just going back to my deserted common room. I believe I'll do a bit of reading, then go to bed. Really nothing to do with so few of us here."

They watched her go, dirty-blond hair bobbing wildly all the way down the hall.

"Well... what now?" Harry asked.

"We could do our homework."

"Hermione-!"

"There's nothing else to do," she said impatiently. "It may not be great fun, but it's just about the only option."

Harry sighed resignedly and followed her to the common room. Once inside, they ploughed their way through the Potions essay, an hour or two crawling by. As Hermione began to work on her Arithmancy, Harry stretched out in front of the fire.

"Layabout," Hermione said.

"Oh, come off it. We just finished an essay, we can leave the others for another night. It's not like we're going to suddenly run out of time."

Her quill paused over the parchment. "Maybe you're right. I wouldn't mind working some more, but I can certainly leave this until tomorrow. In fact," she said as she stoppered her inkwell, "if I do all my homework tonight, there'll be even less to do over the rest of the break."

"Good, it's decided." He yawned slightly. "Want to play a game of chess?"

"You mean, 'do you want to get utterly destroyed in chess'? You know I'm not very good at it."

"That's just because you never play. Your mind's as sharp as a bucket of razors."

Hermione blushed. "No, but thank you." She stood up and walked toward the stairs.

"Where're you going?"

"To stow my homework," she called back. Minutes later, she reappeared, carrying a quilt.

"What's that for?"

But in answer, she sat on the floor in front of the fire and draped the quilt over herself, leaning back on the edge of Harry's armchair.

"It's large enough for two," she said offhandedly as she settled herself. Harry hesitated, then slid off his chair and onto the floor next to her, covering himself with the quilt.

Harry lost track of time as he sat there, enjoying the heat of the fire and the blanket, and watching Hermione's peaceful slumber. Then, to his surprise, she spoke.

"Are you really as okay with it as you seem?"

"What?"

Her eyes opened. "You seem to be okay with it. You know, with me."

"Of course I'm okay with you. We're mates."

"You know what I mean."

Harry sighed. "Yeah, I do. And, I am. We've got on the same as we have since then, and that tells me that you're still the same old Hermione."

She smiled. "I'm glad. I was witless over it."

"Then why send the letter?" he asked, a question that had come to mind once or twice before. "If you were scared to tell me, why suddenly send a letter when you did?"

It was her turn to sigh. "You seemed so despondent."

"Huh?"

"In your letter." She looked into the fire. "Remember the letter you sent back when I told you I'd been summering in the U.S.?"

"Kinda," he said, scratching his head. "I said I was irritated that you hadn't sent one before."

"Well, I couldn't," she said. "I don't own an owl, remember?"

"Oh yeah..."

"I had to wait until I got to Diagon Alley before I could write to you. So that's the first thing I did after I bought my schoolbooks."

"I also said it was great that you had a good time, and that I wish I could be there."

"That's not what you said."

"Well, pretty much it is."

She smirked at him, then reached underneath the quilt and pulled out an envelope.

"That's my letter! Why do you still have it?"

"It's the letter that made me want to tell you. It's important." With that, she opened it, unfolded the parchment inside, and read:

"Dear Hermione. Good to hear you've had a nice summer abroad, even if it's taken you ages to tell me about it. My summer's been lousy. The Dursleys are foul, wretched people, and I wish I could just die. But oh well, there's always next term, which'll be here soon."

Sometimes I get so tired of being the Boy Who Lived... having to live here on Privet Drive because of it. I hate being different. Harry."

Harry made a sour, embarrassed face as Hermione replaced the parchment in the envelope. "Oh, yeah... I'd forgotten how much of a rotten mood I'd been in that day... Uncle Vernon had ordered me to paint the entire house. I'm sorry, it must've been horrid getting a post like that when the one you'd sent was so pleasant."

A small, pained smile reached her mouth. "I felt for you so much, Harry... those four words, 'I hate being different'... they really touched me, because I knew how you felt. Any time I see you enduring bad press or unwanted attention, especially if it's only because of how you got your scar, my heart goes out to you. Neither one of us can help the ways we're different; I've had my disfigurement since birth, and you got yours shortly afterward." She sighed yet again, drawing her knees up under her chin. "And I guess I was just feeling particularly brave, or particularly reckless, when I'd finished reading it, so I decided I was going to tell you at last. I'm so weary of hiding it, I thought it would give me some relief if at least one person at Hogwarts knew, and you're my best friend, and I thought... I could only hope it would strengthen our bond instead of severing it. I could only hope..."

Her expression was unreadable. Harry's hand went to her shoulder almost of its own accord, and she looked up, startled.

"Huh?"

"Nothing... I just..."

And she smiled. In the flickering firelight, Harry was reminded of something that he had noticed almost exactly two years ago - something that had completely left his mind between that moment and this one. He saw what a beautiful young woman (was she a woman? Was that the right word?) Hermione was, how fragile, adorable, and elegant - a fact that had only become more real with time.

Her head slowly lowered onto his shoulder, and he draped the still-raised arm over her. To his confusion, his heart began to beat faster, and his mind went slightly fuzzy. This was his friend, Hermione. The strange reactions he was experiencing were ones he'd associated with Cho Chang. Her bushy hair, so close to him and for longer than it had ever been, smelled strongly of the library (which he had somehow expected), but also held a light, refreshing hint of a flower of some sort. Under the palm on her upper arm, he could feel the slight movement that came with every breath she took. After several moments, increasing his unease, he felt an arm snake its way across his stomach, the hand attached settling on his ribs. It was enough to turn his brain to porridge. He was almost certain that he did not fancy Hermione at all, and yet here he was, so snugly beside her warm body, under a thick quilt, alone, in front of the roaring hearth.

"Thank you, Harry," she half-whispered.

He blinked. "For what?"

"For... being Harry."

To Be Continued

Chapter Seven: The Chemicals Between Us

Unadulterated warmth penetrated and consumed Harry Potter. He was lying deep inside it, and it pulsated, coiling about him, sexual energies coursing through and around his body. He reveled in it, and was more than willing to let it permeate him forever.

A few spiderwebs in his head were brushed away, and he realized the warmth was coming mostly from beneath him. It was outlined in pinks and golds, and seemed to respond to his slightest movements. He caressed it, coaxed it. He became aware that beneath his lips lay texture, and he ate at it hungrily, tasting the heat and the energy, and the more he devoured, the entity seemed to exude more, if not to sate him, than to spur him onward. His teeth sank gently into the soft texture.

With no forewarning, the warmth beneath him faltered, shuddering, then reasserted itself, as heated as ever. A pain - no, a dozen small, sharp pains - dug into his back. His head swam slightly, and he became aware of the sensation of fabric.

Harry opened his eyes to darkness. His mind, still swimming in the sensations he had been experiencing and continued to experience, slowly fixed on the information that fabric was touching his chin and one of his cheeks, and something smooth was flat against his eyes. A moan reached his ear, and he realized its source was nearly joined with it, the vibrations telling him it came from the warmth. Agonizingly, he raised his head an inch, and the surface beneath his eyes came into focus as a blurry mixture of blue, brown and flesh-tone.

Quite apart from this, he became aware that he was at full arousal, and this was grinding into something soft, pliable; he continued to grind for a moment, sweat beading on his forehead, and the surface gave ever so slightly. He was also aware of an unidentifiable object cutting into his hip, and the needles in his back had given way to mild pressure.

As he continued his advance, panting, the moan came again, this time a more distinct "Ohh..." He moved an experimental hand, and it

encountered soft flesh. Fingers closed around the back of his neck. Slowly, cautiously, he heaved himself upward.

Even as he stared, slack-jawed and aghast, disbelieving, the face of the figure beneath him opened her eyes, inches from his own, and her look mirrored his.

Nearly a full minute passed before Harry and Hermione recovered enough to fling themselves away from one another.

"WHAT-"

"HOLY-"

"OH MY-"

"YOU-!"

"B-BUT-"

"HOW?!"

This series of outbursts left them panting even harder than they were to begin with, and the next few seconds were spent staring at each other, trying to regain their breath, as well as some semblance of ordered thought.

Harry stumbled through the fog of confusion at breakneck speed. What in the fucking hell?! Why on earth had he awoken to find himself atop ANYONE, let alone HERMIONE?! Even as he thought this, his eyes flicked over her, noting the blue jumper that was rising and falling rapidly as she tried to settle herself, shadows outlining her peaks. His eyes strayed downward, and even without his glasses on, he could see that her somewhat tight jeans were now quite a bit tighter.

"Oh God," he said after a moment, closing his eyes in an attempt to stave off the growing queasiness. "Oh God, oh God, oh GOD-"

"I can't-," she was babbling. "This - there's no - how could we possibly-"

He opened his eyes again, determinedly not allowing them to stray to her crotch again. His gaze found the quilt.

"Merlin," he breathed. "Last night... the quilt, the fireplace-"

And that's when he realized they were on the floor, in front of the fireplace in the Gryffindor common room. His glasses were laying under an armchair right next to him.

"Oh," Hermione breathed, the hysterical quality in her voice lowering a tiny notch. Her eyes dropped downward slightly, and in more of a squeak, "Oh!"

Harry followed her gaze, then whipped a pillow from the chair into his lap. Hermione grabbed the quilt and hastily pulled it over her legs.

As he snatched up his glasses, he could see Hermione was staring off into space, now clearly dismayed beyond speech. He shoved them back onto his face. He now felt calmer, but only by about half of an iota.

"Maybe," he began, his voice trembling so badly he could barely manage it. "Maybe... we should just... just go to bed..." He knew it was a weak suggestion, as sunlight was streaming through the windows.

But she nodded. Still clutching her quilt, she tried to stand, then fell back to the floor with a thump.

Before he could stop himself, Harry darted forward to help her up. It was only when one hand had closed around her arm and the other around her shoulder that he realized he'd foolishly left the pillow behind.

Hermione's eyes darted to his pelvis, then snapped shut. He could see she was on the verge of tears, and he could feel them beginning to form in his own eyes, as well. Carefully, he bent down and pulled

her into a terrified, clinging hug, his hand stroking her hair without realizing he was doing so.

"N-no-"

"Shh."

Unlike the first time, she had barely struggled against his hug, and her hands curled around his shoulders. "Ha... Harry... I... but... I can't... why..."

Her voice was choked and wavering. He opened his mouth to reply somehow, but no sound came. She began to sniffle quietly, and nothing more came to him than to keep holding on, to harbour this frightened girl as if breaking the embrace would undo the world.

"Harry... we, we shouldn't... you shouldn't be..."

"I... I don't know what- what else to do, I-"

"But I'm... and you're... and..."

Next moment, she had reached up to her neck. When she pulled her hand away, two of her fingers were glistening.

"You... you were... I remember..."

"So do I," Harry croaked, faintly recalling trying to devour her flesh. "I... I didn't-"

"I know." She was still shaking like a leaf. "But... but we were so... in the dream..."

He knew what she meant. The dream had been so erotic, so heated and passionate. How could such a feverish desire grow from no desire whatsoever?

But as soon as that thought had passed, he knew it was not true. The desire HAD existed - in fact, it had been born in him right before the

dream. He could not be sure of when it had been born in her, if it had at all; maybe she was just a victim of his subconscious's libido.

He cursed himself. The blame lay squarely on his shoulders. He had turned a beautiful, strong friendship into something darker, something bereft of the innocence and joviality that had once defined it. He somehow knew there would be no going back.

"I'm sorry."

Harry's eyes flew open. He had not been the one to say it.

"Wh-what for? It's my fault that-"

"I-" And she stopped. A few seconds passed in silence before she could go on. "A voice in the back of m-my mind kept saying if... that it would be a mistake to sit with you under that quilt, that it would... it would bring us too close."

Relief and sympathy washed over Harry, colliding and mixing with each other.

"Hermione, I... I felt it, when you put your head on the... on my shoulder. I felt so strange, but... I didn't want to let you go."

She at last drew back, looking into his startlingly green eyes with her sharp brown ones, currently dulled by tears of shame. "I didn't want to let go, either, but... I knew I should... Oh, Harry, you must hate me so, you must want to kill me for doing this to you, I'm such rubbish, I don't deserve-"

"Shh," he said sternly. Her mouth, still trying to finish the sentence, fell silent. He raised a hand and wiped a tear from one of her eyes. "You... there's no way this is your fault. And I couldn't kill you if I tried, never in a million years." He had no trouble saying this, as no matter the nature of their relationship now, he knew it to be true.

She managed another laugh-sob. "I'm ever so grateful, but you should at least try first."

Harry grinned blearily. 'That's my girl,' he thought. Then he realized what his mind had just referred to her as, and a sinking feeling spread through him.

'My girl'. Was that what she was? She wasn't even a girl, not in the literal sense. But the possessive form his thoughts had taken startled him. Hermione Granger was NOT "his girl". She was a friend, and they had accidentally become too close for one brief, terrifying moment. Harry didn't know if they'd ever be the same again, but he knew that the prospect of Hermione becoming more than a good friend was something he was not ready for.

"I'm... I'm going to bed... I'll... see you later."

Hermione nodded again. Harry wiped another tear from her eyes, tried to flash her something like a reassuring smile, then turned and hurried up the stairs.

iiii

As he lay there, staring at his canopy, Harry tried to relinquish all thought, to blank his mind so as to fall asleep again. Unfortunately, he was unable to do this - it was main reason he had failed at Occlumency. It was easy for Snape, he didn't have quite as much on his mind; though a small part of Harry suspected that was not true, it made him feel better thinking it. He also realized that he would in no way be tired, as he had just awoken. Nevertheless, he stayed, staring into nothing, trying in vain to wipe recent events from the forefront of his consciousness.

When Harry heard distant footsteps, he glanced at his watch. Two hours had passed. He once again set about clearing his head, but was interrupted as the door burst open.

Light from the hall framed Hermione, making her hair appear to glow. After a moment's pause, she half-ran to Ron's bed and sat down heavily, gazing unblinking at him. She still looked distressed, but her face was set, and her watery eyes had regained a determined gleam.

He found he did not much care to look at her; it stirred and amplified up the feelings he had been trying to bury. "H-Hermione-"

"Be quiet," she said softly, a lump still lingering in her throat. "Please, just listen."

A surge of unwanted indignation flared in Harry. Not only had she just burst into his dormitory (a boys' dormitory!) without so much as a knock, but she had just shushed him. However, whatever she had to say seemed important, and admittedly he did want to hear it.

"If we just go our separate ways right now... and we don't confront how we- what just happened," she said nervously, "it might get weird."

"You mean what just happened wasn't weird enough?" An edge crept into his voice.

"Hush," she reiterated. "What I'm trying to say is... I think we should talk about it now, before the weirdness sets. Before we start acting uncomfortably around each other, until it gets to the point where we can't even talk. To the point where... we lose our friendship."

Harry melted. What she said struck a chord. He realized this prediction was probably accurate, and it was one he did not want to come true. To lose Hermione...

"Shaking your head won't fix it."

Harry blinked, then realized he had in fact been trying to fix it that way.

"Hermione, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have-"

"What do you mean? It's not like I wasn't involved."

"But I was on top of you," he said, trying not to think about what he'd just said. "I must've been the one to roll onto you, it's my fault."

"Oh, don't blame yourself for that," she said, a half-smile playing at her lips. "We were asleep, silly!" Her face hardened again. "If it's anyone's fault, it's mine... I shouldn't have thought we could cuddle like that without any consequences. Reckless, stupid..."

"Oh yeah, that's right," Harry said lightly. "It's all your doing!"

When her eyes widened and her lip began to quiver, he hurriedly spoke again. "I'm kidding, just kidding! Please don't cry, Hermione..."

Her eyes rolled, then shut, and she covered her mouth with her hand. "It's not funny. This is not funny, none of it. It's... I don't know what it is."

"I'm sorry, you're right. I shouldn't be ribbing you about this, it's not on. What a git," he whispered harshly to himself.

"You're not a git." She had lowered her hand, and her words were soft. "I don't hate you, I just... I'm not sure what we can do. But I know we have to do SOMETHING."

Harry raised his head, and slowly began moving his brain in a deliberate direction. Hermione was not a girl. She was not a boy, either. That left only one thing - she was his friend. His friend who he had accidentally ended on top of while sleeping, and nothing more. He forced his thoughts to compare the event to accidentally rolling on top of a pillow, and awakening to find you'd been trying to knob it. Strange, yes, but not cause for any concern, and certainly no reason to chuck the pillow in the bin. The same applied here. All darker, more meaningful thoughts were pushed from his psyche, as he knew if he concentrated on anything else, this wouldn't work.

When he spoke, she had been opening her mouth to speak, but fell silent at his words. His voice was somewhat formal. "Hermione, I apologize for rolling on top of you. That was quite inconsiderate of me, and I was probably a bit heavy. I hope I didn't crack any of your ribs or anything, and I assure you this will not happen again." He hesitated. "I'm also sorry for drooling on you, because now you'll have to bathe."

She had been listening intently, an intense relief slowly invading her features. At the last line, she laughed, a musical, genuine laugh.

Harry grinned. "Everything top drawer, then?"

"Top drawer," she managed around her laughter.

They shook hands, then collapsed in fits of mirth. It was the happiest Harry had felt all year, and though he was still a touch shaky, his soul felt lighter than it did when he was astride his Firebolt.

"Want some breakfast? I'm starving."

"Yes, let's!"

iiii

The subject of that morning in the common room was not explored further. Harry, in such coy fashion, had effectively voiced what Hermione was probably going to say; that it was a mistake, and though it made for an extremely awkward moment, there was no real harm done.

As the days drifted by, they entertained themselves by playing Exploding Snap and Gobstones (Hermione still flatly refusing to go near the chessboard), doing their homework, and reading quietly by the fire. Luna would sometimes join them, usually setting up in the Room of Requirement (which obligingly contained all the games they could ever wish to play, or a load of reference volumes). It was too cold for Harry to take out his Firebolt, but occasionally, they took long walks on the snowy grounds, sometimes dropping in on Hagrid. Their idle chatter seldom strayed to "that morning," as they now referred to it when necessary.

The only dark spot in an otherwise enjoyable holiday was another vision. It was so vague that Harry paid it little mind; another flare of rage, similar to the one he'd felt when he and Ron were returning from Hogsmeade. Voldemort had been denied what he sought again.

On Christmas morning, Hermione came bouncing into Harry's dorm, her arms loaded down with presents. He was momentarily startled, but then realized they might as well open them together.

Harry received another green sweater from Mrs. Weasley and a tin of white fudge; a pocket Foe-Glass from Alastor Moody; some Drooble's

Best Blowing Gum and a few Chocolate Frogs from Ron; a photo of Harry's father, transformed into a stag, from Lupin; and an odd, light-green crystal pendant in the shape of a heart from Hermione. It was glowing.

"Thanks," Harry told her, dangling the crystal in front of his face. "But this... it looks a bit pricey..."

"It was." She pulled at the neck of her blouse, and produced an identical one with a transparent brown crystal. "The colour of our eyes, of course."

"Well, it's great, but you shouldn't h-"

"There's more. See how they're glowing faintly?"

"Yeah..."

"They glow brighter when they're closer to one another," she said, sounding a bit embarrassed. "Here, look, when they come in contact..."

She rose from Ron's bedside and walked over, touching the two crystals together. Instantly, their colours faded, and they were shining brilliantly, a pure white.

"Wicked," he breathed.

"I... I dunno, I feel so much closer to you after..." She was blushing and examining her shoes. "I just saw them, last time we were in Hogsmeade, and I..."

"I love it," he said earnestly, beaming as he fastened the silver clasp behind his neck. Hermione grinned from ear to ear, then pecked him on the cheek.

iiii

Christmas dinner found the two of them seated at a single, long table in the Great Hall due to how few students were there; aside from themselves and Luna, there was a Hufflepuff second year by the

name of Blake Pieper, whom the older students and teachers seemed to intimidate without any intent to do so.

"Cracker, Mr. Pieper?" Dumbledore said brightly, holding a bowl in front of him. The boy took one hesitantly, then pulled. He jumped as it exploded, dropping a slide whistle and a live gopher into his mashed potatoes.

The items from the silver crackers were as ridiculous and light-hearted as ever. Dumbledore was wearing gold-framed sunglasses over his half-moon spectacles, and Snape had reluctantly donned a pink cowboy hat. Harry had shoved the purple tiara he'd gotten onto Hermione's head, and she'd tried to get him to wear the furry green slippers that had emerged from hers ("But they match your eyes!"). Professor Sprout had received a dreidel, which she was puzzling over and prodding warily before Dumbledore explained that it was a Jewish Muggle artifact. Luna was contentedly wearing her surprise; a top hat made of zebra skin with a peacock plume stuck in it, which she had thought was quite elegant, and had commented that she would probably try wearing it often.

"An' then he says to the poor sod, he says," Hagrid bellowed as he wiped his eyes, a gaudy turtle shell necklace adorning him festively and his face a deep crimson from the steady flow of wine he'd been consuming, "'GET OUT, or I'll chop off yer other one!'"

Most of the teachers, Blake and Harry exploded with laughter, while Hermione unsuccessfully tried to look disgusted, eventually grinning in spite of herself. Snape allowed himself a smirk, and Luna was apparently not paying attention, eyes fixated on her cranberry sauce.

i i i i

"Harry, you mustn't!"

He rolled his eyes, dropping the Invisibility Cloak back into the armchair. "But what's the harm? I'll be back in no time, you'll see."

Hermione sighed exasperatedly. "Fine, then, but if you get caught and we lose house points, I'll make sure everyone knows where they went!"

Harry grinned, holding up the cloak and a bit of parchment. "But I won't. Back in a few."

As he whirled the cloak around himself and headed toward the portrait hole, he saw she was standing there, her arms folded, and looking scornfully in his general direction.

"Aww, don't be like that."

She rolled her eyes, an action much more pronounced than his had been. "I'm going to bed."

"Wait, don't-!"

"I want no part of such frivolous activities."

He pulled the cloak off. "If you go to bed now, there's no point in me doing this. Please, wait up." He smiled at her in what he hoped was an innocent fashion. "I just want to make it a proper celebration."

She shook her head, determined not to smile, but she couldn't help it. "You are an arrogant, foolhardy boy."

He grinned, replaced the cloak and raced out the portrait hole.

Once outside the common room, he tapped the parchment with his wand. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

The Marauder's Map came alive, ink spreading across the parchment and outlining the grounds of Hogwarts. He found the dot labeled "Harry Potter", then looked around it carefully for anyone he might want to avoid. Dumbledore was in his office, Filch was in the Astronomy tower, and Snape was in his classroom. He set off for the statue of the one-eyed witch.

He met no obstacle, and after several minutes, he was tapping the statue with his wand and muttering "Dissendium." Harry stashed the cloak at the bottom of the slide, muttered "Lumos!" to light his path,

then flew down the corridor to the cellar of Honeydukes, and made better time than he'd ever done.

Half an hour brought Harry back to the cellar of Honeydukes, laden with six bottles of butterbeer and an assortment of candies. He'd been tempted to pick up some firewhisky from the Hog's Head, but wasn't sure he even wanted to try it. As he flew down the narrow passageway, glowing wand tip held high, he managed to get the bottles into the bag of sweets one-handed. When he reached his cloak, he put down the bag and pulled the map out.

He glanced around to make sure no one was near the statue. The path was clear. He made to stow the map again, then did a double take.

"That can't be," he whispered aloud. "No, impossible..."

He pocketed it, rubbed his eyes, wiped his glasses on his shirt, then looked again. The dot and name attached had vanished.

"Trick of the low lighting," he muttered. Then, staring at the map carefully, he double-checked any potential dangers. None. He tapped it with the glowing wand and muttered "Mischief managed," wiping it clean, draped the cloak over himself, grabbed the bag of goods and headed out of the statue and straight for the common room.

"About time," Hermione said as the portrait hole swung open. "I thought you'd got nabbed."

"Nah," he breathed, dumping everything on a nearby table.

"What's wrong?" He saw her brow wrinkled slightly. "You look like you've seen a ghost. Not that that's uncommon around here," she added quietly.

"I did, sort of." He made sure the portrait hole had closed, then led her over to their armchairs. "I just saw something on the map... something weird." He pulled it out and held it out.

"Is it still there?" She reached for it, and he handed it over obligingly.

"No, I don't think so."

She produced her wand and started to tap it, then hesitated. "I swear that I'm... what was it? I've never used this thing."

Harry allowed himself a half-smirk, then tapped it himself. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

"You never are," she said as if he'd been making a statement, grinning deviously. "Yes, there's the two of us. Lupin was quite a genius."

"My dad and Sirius had a hand in it, too," Harry said in an offended tone. He doubted whether Wormtail actually had any part in creating it.

"Yeah, yeah. Well, there's nothing out of the ordinary here. What did you see?"

"Bellatrix Lestrange."

Her eyebrows knitted, then shot upward. "But Harry, how could she possibly have been here?!"

"I don't know, but I saw it. I rubbed my eyes and looked again, but she was gone. Maybe it was just a name that looked like hers - I was in the tunnel, the lighting wasn't exactly great for reading."

"Where did you see it?"

"I forget... it was so weird seeing it on there that I wasn't paying attention to its location."

She sat back, looking hard at the parchment, as if willing the name to pop in again. "This is not good, Harry. Your eyes might've been deceiving you, but if they weren't..."

"The map doesn't lie, I know."

"We've got to tell Dumbledore-"

"No." He snatched the map back from her hands, and she jumped. "I'm not going to him, telling him I'm having hallucinations on a bit of parchment I shouldn't even have. Mischief managed," he said, tapping it. "Even if he believed me, there's nothing for it, now... if she really was here, then it's past-tense."

"You're... you're not going to go stalking after her, are you?"

Harry looked up, surprised. "Why would I do that?"

"You did it last year," she snapped.

"Oh, that's right." She was referring to his grief-stricken chase in the Ministry of Magic, which had more or less ended with him being possessed by Voldemort.

"I know you blame her for Sirius's death-"

"SHE WAS-"

"I'm not saying it wasn't justifiable," she hastily added. "But you can't go tearing after her like that, even if she is there. You couldn't best her last time, and she might-"

"I reckon I could now," he said coldly. "I've had half a year to get over what she did. My heart's not going to be clouding my judgement this time."

"Harry, please-"

"I'm not going after her," he said, trying to stop her from arguing uselessly. "Like you and I have both said, we can't be sure it was really her. If she was still on the map, I... I don't know. But that's neither here nor there, so don't worry."

Hermione sighed disconcertedly. "I just don't want you running off and getting yourself killed."

He looked up, and his resentment and indignation lessened. "I know. I appreciate your concern, really I do. I promise I won't do anything dumb."

She smiled nervously, then coughed. "So, what'd you get from Hogsmeade?"

iiiiii

As New Year's Eve wore on, Harry and Hermione opened their second bottles of butterbeer, then resumed tossing Chocolate Frog cards into each other's lap, a sort of make-shift game that had no point whatsoever. An old victrola they'd dug up was playing some musty old music from the nineteenth century. They'd found Luna wandering the halls and asked her if she was staying up, but she said she didn't hold with New Year's, because it was a lie or some other rubbish. Blake Pieper was probably holed up in Hufflepuff's common room, or else asleep, so they couldn't ask him.

"You know, you're not the first person outside the family doctor to find out about it," she said, flipping a Merlin at him.

"Really?" he managed around a licorice wand, which was dangling from his mouth like an overlong cigarette.

"Yeah." She stopped throwing cards and picked up her bottle, though she did not drink from it. "Once, when I was six. It was recess, and we were out on the playground. Some really mean boys were running around me in circles, and I was telling them off for breaking some rule or another."

"That sounds like you, alright."

She grinned. "Stop it. Anyway, one of them stopped running and sneaked up behind me. I was yelling at a particularly large boy with a square jaw and didn't notice until he was upon me. He... pulled down my trousers... the bloomers, as well."

Harry snorted, allowing the licorice wand to fall into his lap. "A Dudley-in-training."

"It was awful... a cry went up from everyone in front of me, and the perpetrator, no doubt expecting loads of laughter, wondered what was going on. I squatted down, trying to pull my pants back up, but he was still holding them at my knee level. I let out a panicked scream, and..."

"And?"

She shook her head. "It was as if I'd... broken reality. Everything went dead quiet. I stood up, finally pulling my trousers back over my bum, and saw that everyone was just... standing there, perfectly still, with these vacant expressions on their faces. I felt so frightened that I hid behind the slide. After a few moments, though, they all began moving again, as if nothing had happened... not even the taunting session."

Harry stayed silent for a minute, then whispered, "You Obliviated them."

"It was the first time I can remember that I made something extraordinary happen." She finally took a sip. "All I kept thinking was, 'Nobody can find out I'm different!' And I guess I was so desperate for them not to, my latent powers did as I wished. Nobody ever recalled the incident, except me."

Harry grinned. "Cleverest witch of your age." She sheepishly looked at the floor. "Even at six, you were brilliant."

"What are you buttering me up for?"

"Nothing!" he protested. But she laughed. Harry joined in, and they started pelting each other with cards again. Then Harry noticed his watch.

"Oh, a minute and a half 'til midnight," he said, scooping the cards into a box.

"Here we go!" She did the same.

As they poured their butterbeer into a couple of champagne flutes he'd nicked from the kitchens the previous day, Hermione made a small cough that reluctantly reminded him of Umbridge. He looked up.

"Er, Harry," she said in a tone that sounded like she'd been caught at something disgraceful, "you know that... well, on New Year's Eve... people are traditionally supposed to..." She fell silent.

"Yes?"

"It... it's nothing, nevermind."

Harry was staring at his watch when she spoke up again, twenty seconds from twelve o'clock.

"Harry..."

"Hermione..." he mocked.

"The countdown!"

"Oh!"

Harry began speaking the numbers in a jovial tone, starting with "fifteen", and Hermione eased out of her chair to stare at his watch as well. When he reached "two," however, she cut across him, her face as pink as he'd ever seen it.

"Happy New Year, Harry Potter!"

And before Harry could form any sort of reaction, causing him to drop his butterbeer, soaking the carpet, she pulled him into a deep kiss.

To Be Continued

Chapter Eight: Catching Up

Years later, looking back, it would seem quite amusing to Harry Potter that he hadn't realized what Hermione was getting at before it happened. In the present time, however, his eyes shot as wide as dinner plates, and he simply stared straight ahead. Her hands were clasped around the back of his neck, presumably to prevent him from escaping, and her knees were in his chair, straddling him. Her lips were quite as soft as Cho's, and her heated breath was coming at least twice the speed. After just a few seconds, she broke the kiss, standing back up.

"Well, I'm off to bed, tonight was fun, toodles!" she said rather quickly, full of a false, bashful cheer, then sprinted for the stairs.

"HOLD IT!" She stopped.

"Now," he said shakily, trying to stand up. "Hermione Granger, what in God's name do you mean by kissing me just now?"

"It's... it's a New Year's Kiss," she said, her voice a touch higher than normal. "Like I started to say before, it's traditional."

"WHAT-"

"You're supposed to kiss someone at the stroke of midnight at the beginning of the new year. It's to bring good fortune, and, erm... stuff."

"Erm... stuff?! " he repeated. He had never known Hermione to be this vague about information of any sort.

"Look," she said, spinning around, her face glowing a crimson that would light up even the darkest reaches of Pluto, "I'm really sorry if it offended you, but it was just supposed to be in the spirit of the holiday, and I'm really sorry, and I think I'll just go on up to bed now-"

"Wait, wait, wait," he said, shaking his head, his eyes squeezed shut. "So this is like that rubbish rule with mistletoe."

He could hear a modicum of relief in her voice as she spoke again. "Yes, that's right, exactly! It's just one of those old superstitious sayings!"

"But you're not a superstitious person," he said, his mouth starting to curl into a smile.

"W-ell, I know," she said slowly. "I just... you know, it's one of those fun little things. I mean, why stay up for midnight, anyway? The year will come whether or not we're awake to witness it."

"You just wanted to kiss me," Harry said, his grin set at "maximum cheese".

"No, no, I didn't!" Panic.

"Yes, yes, you did." Accusation.

"You've got me all wrong!" Hysterical.

"I think I've got you just fine." Triumph.

"Stop it!" She stalked over to him. "It was just a stupid kiss, alright?!"

"Okay, okay," he said, his tone purposefully unconvincing. "I believe you."

She sputtered for a moment, then let out an "OOOH!!!" of pure frustration, folded her arms and spun around, marching back to the stairs. He sighed.

"Hermione-"

"GET STUFFED, POTTER!!!"

He was still blinking when he heard her door slam.

"Reparo," he said idly, the shattered champagne flute on the carpet snapping back to one piece again.

iiii

Hermione did not speak to him during breakfast, which was extremely awkward, considering they were the only two at the table. It felt like a part of him had been severed with a chainsaw; he'd been feeling so much closer to her than ever before since she bore her secret, and suddenly the cold shoulder was presented to him. He seemed to sense that this squabble was nothing serious - quite silly, really, but he did not say as much, as he wanted to keep his goolies intact.

When she got up to leave, he followed, but she had a head start and was walking faster than him. Eventually, when she reached the Fat Lady, saying the password ("Lacewing") slowed her down enough for Harry to catch up, and he grabbed her arm halfway across the common room, moving to block the staircase.

"Let me go!" she snapped.

"Not until we talk this thing out!"

"What's to talk out?! You're a pig-headed, asinine little-"

"Don't say things you'll regret," he said.

She abruptly broke off, stalked over to her armchair, and sat.

"Listen," he said as he sat across from her, "I was being a bit of an ass last night, and I'm sorry. I shouldn't have given you so much shite over that kiss." He peered at her intently. "But was it really just because of New Year's?"

She looked up, her anger having hardly abated, and her voice had an unmistakeable chill. "Why tell you anything if you won't believe me?"

Her eyebrows, jointed together as if permanently glued, raised slightly as he got off his chair and kneeled at her feet.

"I am truly, honestly, verily and wholly sorry that I doubted you. Even if you were acting like a nutter." He got back into the chair. "But you've got to understand, you'd just kissed me! It was... well, weird! I mean, we've had enough weirdness lately, haven't we?"

At last, she seemed to let go of her seething mood. "I know. I wasn't even sure I was going to do it at first... well, I've never really kissed anyone on New Year's - or at all, for that matter. I just... I guess I wanted to take that opportunity to..." She sighed in defeat, shame and self-reprimand punctuating her words. "...to use you as a guinea pig. What a little bitch I am."

Harry started. Hermione rarely ever swore, and he'd never heard her swear so harshly. After a few seconds, he recovered. "Hey, don't be that hard on yourself. I didn't mind the kiss - it was actually, erm, quite nice. I was just... well, floored." He could feel his face growing slightly hot.

A corner of her mouth tugged upward slightly.

"But next time you're going to do something that mad, WARN ME!"

This time, she broke into a true grin. "Deal."

iiii

The foyer was packed as the students returned from Christmas break. As the pair of them stood watching them file in, Neville came up to them, waving brightly.

"Hey, Harry! Hermione!"

"Hi, Neville!" they shouted in unison.

Ron was one of the last to come in, and he was sporting a dragon hide beret.

"What on earth is that thing atop your head?" Hermione said.

"What? It was a gift from Charlie. You... you don't like it?"

They exchanged a glance, then giggled.

"Bugger you, then," he said, straightening it. "Well, Romania was nice... I actually got to have a fly on one! Er, dragon, I mean."

"How's Charlie?" Harry asked.

"Not bad. Nearly got his hand bit off last week, though. How was your holiday?"

They exchanged another glance, one less mirthful.

"What, what happened?"

"Hermione snogged me," Harry said promptly.

"WHAT?!"

"UHT!!!"

And Harry was being chased up the marble staircase, Hermione snatching at his scalp.

Ten minutes later found the two of them gasping for breath, halfway up the steps leading to the old Divination room (now vacant, due to relocation).

"You... beastly... I..."

"Well... I just..."

Finally, after a few more minutes, Hermione shouted, "Why in the bloody hell did you go and tell him that?!"

Harry shrugged. "Well, it was either that or the other thing."

"Why did you have to tell him ANYthing?!"

"Oh, come off it, Hermione. Ron may not be exceptionally bright, but he's not stupid, either. Eventually, he'll suss out we're acting a bit different. Wouldn't you rather he thinks it's because of a simple kiss than... left to his own imagination? Which, frankly, couldn't be much worse than the reality of that morning."

She stood for a moment, letting herself cool off. "You're right, of course," she said at last. "I let my temper get the better of me."

"Good. Now when he brings it up - which you know he will - we'll just... tell him the circumstances. At least Ron's no rumourmonger, and he might even understand."

"Yes, yes." She sat down on a step. "Poor Ronald. I don't like this, you know... keeping things from him."

"You've been keeping something from us for five years," he put in.

"Score one for the Gryffindor Seeker." Hermione took a deep breath, shook her hair out, and laid back on the stairs, staring at the ceiling high above them. "Why do I have to be such a secretive little wench? If only I could be normal, if only my LIFE was normal..."

"Welcome to Club Potter. We have embroidered jackets, you know."

An eyeroll and snort of disgust later, she looked over at him. "Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you wish I hadn't told you?"

"It-"

"I mean, do you think we'd be on better terms? If I'd never mentioned I even had a secret from the off? Ever since I spilled, we keep ending in... delicate situations. I feel like we're hanging by a thread."

"No," he said flatly. "True, that really threw me for a loop, and there are the erm... 'delicate situations'. But I'm more than glad you confided in me, even if not in Ron. I can't say things are the same, but... perhaps they're just a bit better."

"Really? You're not just placating me, are you?"

"Of course not."

"If you had a secret like that one, would you tell me?"

Harry hesitated. He did have a secret he had been keeping from her. But this information wasn't so much embarrassing as it was... alarming. The last thing he wanted was to have this hanging over his friends' heads.

"Harry?" He could hear the hurt beginning to blossom in her voice, and it pained him equally.

"Hmm?"

"If you had a secret like mine... you would trust me with it... wouldn't you?" His heart felt sick at the uncertainty she spoke with. Mistrust was brewing, and he did not want her thinking he was untrustworthy.

"Yes, I will."

She nodded, then stopped. "Wait... what do you mean by 'you will'?"

"Erm..." Inwardly, he cursed his tongue.

"You're hiding something," she said, sounding both wounded and intrigued.

He fidgeted.

"You are, aren't you?!" It looked as if she was on the verge of leaping to her feet and screaming.

"It's nothing juicy," he said in resignation. She had him cornered, and it was all because of his own damnable mouth. Sometimes, it was no use trying to withhold information from Hermione. "It's nothing pleasant, or remotely good. It's right ghastly."

"What, what?!"

He stood suddenly. "Unlike your secret, this is one I can tell Ron, as well. And I think I'd rather... tell both of you in one go, I mean."

She was now looking at him, deep concern etched around her eyes.
"Harry...?"

"Let's go look for him."

i i i i

"NO!" Hermione breathed.

All he could do was nod glumly, then shrug. "Hey, if I don't..."

"Yeah," Ron said, his face quite pale. "Terrible thing, this, but I'd rather see you murder than BE murdered."

They were sitting uncomfortably on desktops in an empty classroom. Harry, as much as he didn't want to, and despite already knowing what their reactions would be, had just told them what the contents of the Prophecy with his name on in the Department of Mysteries had been.

"It..." Hermione began. "I mean, it's one thing to think you m-may have to fight him again... but it's something else again knowing that you have to... to..."

"You sure it can't be Neville?" Ron demanded.

"That much is Voldemort's fault." Ron winced slightly, but Harry noticed he was finally starting to get used to hearing it. "Maybe if he HAD gone after Neville... but he marked me. He turned me into a parseltongue, gave me this stupid thing on my forehead that says, 'Hey, I'm the Boy Who Almost Snuffed It, and I really will unless I kill the guy who tried!'"

"Oh, Harry..." She sniffled.

"See, this is why." He gestured to Hermione, who was fighting back tears with a hand over her mouth and nose. "This is why I didn't tell you... it's bad enough that I have this on my mind - that Dumbledore does, too. I didn't want you guys sitting there, watching me as if I'm on my deathbed."

"Then why tell us now?" Ron asked, genuinely curious.

Harry dared not mention Hermione's secret, but he found he didn't have to. "Hermione. She sort've worked out I was hiding something, and tried to prise it out of me. I reckoned I'd just tell you both at the same time, as... well, the once is enough to be going on with, isn't it?"

Ron nodded, eyes now boring into the floor. Hermione's face held a mixture of sorrow... and gratitude. He could only guess this was for tapdancing around her secret.

"Listen, you guys... don't think about it, okay? Just... it's probably a long way off, years, even..."

"But Harry, you have to kill You-Know-Who!" Ron croaked. "How can we forget a thing like that?!"

"By not remembering it," Harry said snarkily.

"I'd..." Hermione was too choked up to speak properly. "I'd say start practicing... the... You-Know-Which-Curse, but... but that's awful!"

"I know."

"On the other hand, if you haven't mastered it, you won't be prepared when you finally have to use it!"

"I know."

"But you-"

"LOOK," he said, a bit louder than he meant to. "I know I have to use Avada Kedavra on him someday. Maybe it'll be long after I'm an Auror, and they probably make sure you know that curse in your Auror training."

"But Harry, what if it comes down to it before you become an Auror... if you even become one?" She almost sounded like she wanted to run from the room. "What if you have to combat him again before you even leave Hogwarts?!"

"Yeah, mate," Ron put in. "You need to have your guard up, it could happen any day now."

"I'm still not sure how that's going to work," Harry said, more to himself than to them. "We couldn't fight each other last time."

"What d'you mean?"

And there it was. The other thing he'd deliberately never told anyone.

"Last time we fought," he said slowly, looking at the blackboard, "our wands reacted strangely. That's because... because our wands are brothers." At this, he pulled out his wand - his constant companion for over five years - and twirled it lightly in his fingers.

"How can wands have brothers?" Ron said, his voice full of skepticism. "I mean, they're bits of wood!"

"Fawkes."

"Fawkes?"

"Both my wand and Voldemort's have one of Fawkes' tail feathers in them. They're the only two wands in existence with tail feathers specifically from that phoenix. Apparently, the two cancel each other out." He sighed. "When the... cage of light was around us, I... heard phoenix song."

"Huh?!" Ron, who had not been there, had no idea what he was talking about.

"Nevermind. The point is, I'm not too sure I could actually kill him if I tried, even if, God forbid, I'd successfully used the curse on a few dozen people already. Of course, if I could curse him before he could raise his wand, I might be able to pull it off, but..."

"Slim chance of that," Ron finished gloomily.

"Dinner," Harry said suddenly. "It's... probably starting now. Let's- let's go eat."

"Are you mad?" Ron half-shouted. "What kind of nutter would be hungry after hearing something like that?!"

"A nutter who'd rather eat than think about his morbid destiny."

Silence fell. Then, one by one, they stood and walked toward the door.

iiii

A solemn week passed before they returned to their usual state of camaraderie. The impact of what Harry must do one day had hit them hard, and being forced to think about it again had also put Harry in a mood. But after a week of barely speaking to each other, they all seemed to realize that moping around was quite useless. They'd just have to cross that bridge when they came to it, and there was no point worrying about what it looked like now.

During that sobering week, Harry did manage to inform Ron about the odd thing he'd spotted on the map. Ron didn't really seem to think much of it.

"It was probably your eyes acting up in the wandlight," he said, voicing the same opinion Harry had.

It was this fact that had led to the eventual raising of their spirits, as Ron had wanted to know why Harry was using the map, and in turn why he was getting party supplies.

"You mean you actually snogged him?!" he shouted. "I thought Harry was having me on!"

"Shut up, Ronald!" she hissed. "What if someone hears-?"

"Let them hear!" Ron bellowed. "MY TWO BEST FRIENDS ARE MASHING LIPS!!!"

"Damn it, Ron, shut up!" Harry pleaded.

Harry had eventually cast a Jelly-Legs Jinx on him when he'd said he was going off to tell Cho about this.

"At least she's gotten over Viktor Krum," he said, collapsing on the floor and shooting Harry a dirty look.

"Oh..." Hermione said sadly.

"What?" Ron demanded as he made to stand up, though his wobbly legs would not support him properly. "You're not still daydreaming about that surly git, are you?"

"Well, first of all, he's not a surly git," she said crossly. "Second, Viktor and I are just pen-friends. Or we were..."

"Were'?" Harry asked.

"Mr. Krum found out about our correspondance, and he'd rather his son not associate with a... you know."

"A Muggle-born girl?" Harry guessed.

"Right the first time. Viktor said it wasn't just that, though; he's supposed to be focusing harder on his game."

"That's right, he plays for Bulgaria," Harry muttered. "Strange how having someone visit at your school and sharing several near-death experiences can almost make you forget they're a celebrity."

"He said he'll try to write every now and then, but said it would be best if I didn't write back." She looked thoroughly depressed.

"Good riddance," Ron said.

Knowing full well he didn't know the counter-jinx, the two of them left him laying there, struggling with his useless legs.

iiiiii

As February began, their homework had reached astronomical proportions. Even Hermione had to work longer than she usually did, though in her case, her efforts always paid off with an "O".

"Arithmancy is getting to be quite taxing," she said one night, bending over her book. "It's still the best subject, though. Why haven't you two been taking it?"

"Are you kidding?" Ron said, lowering his quill. "It's all I can do to keep my head above water!"

"What about you, Harry?"

Harry laughed. "Don't need it to become an Auror, do I?"

"Stop acting like it's already in the bag!"

"Oh, but it is. I'm the Boy Who Almost Snuffed It, remember? If I put in an application for Minister of Magic, they'd probably have me in the office by nightfall!" Ron chuckled, but Hermione scowled.

"And what would Mr. Fudge be doing?" Hermione said, her lips pursing at his flippant attitude.

"Scrubbing toilets."

The three of them had a good laugh about that before settling back to their respective piles of parchment and books.

"Harry," Hermione said suddenly, "what's that?"

"Huh?"

"Right there," she said, pointing to a stack of books next to him.

"Those are books, Hermione; it's what we call it when a load of pages are stuck together. I figured you'd know that by now." He might have kept on this for a bit longer, but he quailed under her glare.

"Arcane And Obscure Elixirs And Draughts'. That's NOT one of our textbooks."

"I just, wondered what was in it."

"I see," she said, disbelieving. "You were merely curious about a potions book. You, who hate the class with a passion. Naturally, you'd be interested; why on earth did I ask?"

"Yeah, the book's a real snore," he said casually. "I'll probably take it back soon."

She returned to her homework, but he could tell she was thoroughly unconvinced.

As he and Ron were preparing for bed, Ron again asked him why he had it.

"I told you, I just wondered what kind of potions were in there."

"Hermione doesn't buy that rubbish, and neither do I. What are you playing at? It's not even a library book."

Harry blinked. "How did you-?"

"There's no number on the spine," Ron said, shrugging. "All the library books have one, you know that."

"I picked it up in Diagon Alley. It's an old thing, as you can see, and it was going for quite cheap, so I figured there'd be no harm in it. Besides, I need to bring my Potions marks up a bit if I want to be an Auror." That much was the truth.

"How cheap?"

"A Sickle or two, I think it was. Not any more than that, I'm sure."

"Oh." He slid into bed. "I guess that's not TOO bad, though I can think of a dozen better ways to spend a Sickle."

"So can I. The book's got some weird stuff in it, but nothing that great."

Ron nodded, then yawned. "G'night, 'Gabe Galleon'."

Harry grinned. "Sod off." To Be Continued

Chapter Nine: People Are Talking

The first thing Harry noticed when he opened his eyes and sat up is that he didn't know where he was; the location was completely foreign to him. A sandy beach stretched out beneath him, and water was lapping at the shore to his left. Low cliffs bordered the sand on his other side.

"Harry!"

He stood, brushed the sand from his seat, and looked around more carefully. The sun was setting over the water, a beautiful display of oranges and pinks. He could see trees far down the beach - palm trees. Everything smelled wet and alive. "Where in hell...?"

"Harry!"

He quickly spun around to see Hermione bounding over the dunes toward him. She was wearing a light-blue sundress, and carrying white sandals in her hand. Her other arm was waving at him emphatically.

"Harry!"

It was as he began to run toward her that he realized he wasn't wearing any shoes. He felt his stomach - no shirt, either. He looked down, and saw that he was wearing a green bathing suit. He supposed it made sense, what with the beach and all.

"Harry!"

An abandoned turtle shell tripped him. He jumped up, brushed the sand from his face and chest, and pressed on to meet her.

"Harry!"

"I'm coming!" he shouted as she came into clearer focus. Now he could see that she was wearing a hat that matched her dress, and the crystal necklace she'd shown him on Christmas. He put a hand to his chest, and found he was wearing his, as well.

"Harry!" she said, finally stopping in front of him.

"Hi," he panted. They stayed hunched up, catching their breath, for a minute or so. Then, Hermione spoke.

"Are you okay?"

"Er, spiffy," he said, looking around again. "Where are we?"

"Brefasiraedi," she replied promptly, a word that held no meaning to him. He noticed her voice sounded quite far away.

"Right."

Just then, Ron walked by. He was wearing trunks much the same as Harry's, save his were orange.

"Harry!" he exclaimed, beaming and waving.

"Uh, hello, Ron." Then, without warning, Ron sunk into the ground and out of sight. "RON!!!"

"Oh, that happens all the time, here," Hermione said, laughing. "He'll be back."

"If... if you say so. But I still don't know where we are!"

"Touch your toes."

He blinked. "What?"

"Touch your toes!" With that, she tossed her sandals aside, bent down and clasped her own feet, then stood again. "Like that!"

"Why?"

"It's great fun, try it!"

Harry shrugged, bent down, and touched his toes. Through the gap in his legs, he saw Hermione was suddenly standing behind him.

"How'd you get around me so fast?" He made to stand up, but one of her hands was between his shoulder blades.

"Never you mind, just hold still."

And with that, she had whipped his shorts down to his ankles.

"WHA-?!"

"Relax, Harry."

"But what the hell are you doing?!"

"Relax, Harry. It's great fun, you'll see!"

Suddenly, he felt something warm and hard poke him in the arse. Harry screamed.

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With a thump, Harry fell out of bed, panting and clutching his chest, his sheets tangled around his body.

"Blimey, mate, didn't think it'd give you such a start!" Ron said, lowering his wand.

"What... where...?!"

"Hurry up, you two!" Hermione said from the doorway. "Breakfast!"

"I just... I had the... the strangest..."

"Tell us all about it at breakfast!" Hermione said pointedly. "I'm quite famished, and you're taking forever!"

As he stood and began working himself free of the sheets, he said, "Did you poke me in the bum with that wand?"

"Yeah, I was trying to wake you up. You were thrashing like mad!"

"Don't EVER do that again!"

iiii

"...and then I felt a poke up my bum," he said, glaring at Ron. "I thought Hermione was trying to sodomize me."

Ron was shaking with laughter, and Hermione had been as well - up until this last bit.

"Ron shouldn't have done that," she said anxiously.

"I know!" Harry said, rounding on the chuckling Weasley. "What possessed you to rape me with your wand?!"

Ron stopped laughing, a disgusted look on his face. "You make it sound like I was aiming for it, mate. I was just trying to give you a jab - shaking you hadn't done any good. You were rolling around like a dog with fleas, I couldn't tell where I was poking."

After they polished off their eggs and were headed for Transfiguration, Ron went back to the Great Hall for another bit of toast. Hermione jerked Harry out of the crowded hallway and into an empty room.

"Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry-"

"Don't be," he whispered. "It was just a dream. A very horrid, very unsettling dream."

"I would never dream of- of-"

"I should hope not!"

"But you only had that dream because I told you!" she whispered, sounding truly remorseful. "If I hadn't-"

"I can handle stupid dreams," he said, snorting. "Just so long as nobody ever shoves anything up my jacksie to wake me up again."

She began to giggle.

"What?"

"I'm sorry," she said, trying to hide her smile. "It's just... well, that I happened to be behind you in your dream... and then Ron..."

"IT'S NOT FUNNY!!!" He lowered his voice due to all the heads that had turned toward the door when he'd shouted. "Though I am sort of glad it was you. What if Ron had been back there? That would've been even weirder..."

Hermione's face began to pinken. "You mean it... was less weird with... me back there?"

A pause. "That's sick, Hermione. I'm not a bloody puff."

All the colour, especially the pink that had been collecting, drained from her face. She looked horrified. "I'm not saying anything like-"

"You were saying that even though I don't fancy the boys, I'd still take it up the bum from you."

"No!" She was pleading with him now. "I just, I felt honoured that you didn't feel as strange with it being me, even though you didn't want it to happen at all, and I completely realize that - please don't think I'm saying anything about your sexuality, I know you don't fancy boys!"

He looked at her closely for a moment, then sighed. "All right, I get what you mean, now. Sorry I was so short with you."

"This is exactly what I was talking about," she said, her expression still slightly put out. "I told you everything, and now we keep having these rows. I wish I never had."

"The more you say that, the more I start to agree with you, so please, quit saying it!" He stopped, realizing he was being a wanker again. "I didn't mean that. But you've got to stop apologizing for who you are."

She smiled reluctantly, but he could tell she retained her misgivings.

"C'mon, let's get to class."

"O-okay."

"Oh, one more thing... if I ever hear you say 'touch your toes', I swear I'll chuck you at the Whomping Willow."

She grinned wickedly.

iiii

"Psst!"

As Harry stood to let Hermione through (she had just excused herself to use the restroom), he turned to see Neville looking at him.

"What?"

Neville glanced to either side, then whispered, "What's up with you and Hermione?"

Harry's eyebrows knitted as he sat down again. "What?" he repeated.

"You heard me," Neville said, somewhat impatiently.

"Yeah, but what are you on about?"

"You two have been acting weird all year; it's gotten worse since we got back from Christmas." His voice dropped so low it was barely audible. "Are... are you... having it off?"

Harry's jaw almost hit the floor. "Neville!!!" he hissed.

"Just asking," Neville said, shifting nervously.

"No, we are not!" Harry's face flushed. "Who told you that?!"

"Nobody!" He sounded hurt. "Like I said, you two have been acting dodgy lately, and I just wondered why-"

"That's none of your concern!" he snapped.

"Fine." He bent over his spoon, which they were supposed to be Transfiguring into butterflies. Just then, Professor McGonagall walked by, looking down her square-framed spectacles at them, almost as if she knew they had just been talking (and she probably did).

"You need quite a bit more work there, Potter," she said, indicating his spoon that he'd only managed to stick antennae on. "I trust you will concentrate more on your spoon and less on your socializing for the remainder of the period?"

"Yes, Professor," he said, waving his wand at the spoon, still unable to cause it to sprout wings.

As they left the class, Harry pulled Hermione aside and talked to her in a low voice.

"Neville's nosing around," he murmured.

"What d'you mean?"

"He knows we've been acting strange. He thought we were bunking up."

"WHAT?!"

Several people stopped and stared.

"Half our grade?!" she shouted, and the students began filing past again.

"Good work," Harry whispered, allowing himself a half-smile.

"I had a feeling this would happen!" she hissed. "We've been behaving too oddly, too intimate... and Neville's probably just the first one who'll notice..."

"I owe him an apology," he whispered. "I kind of snapped at him."

Hermione sighed. "You reckon I should just tell the whole school?"

"It's up to you," Harry said, though he doubted she was serious. "I mean, as long as you want to keep it a secret, I'll guard it with my life."

She flashed him an appreciative smile, then sighed. "This isn't going to be pretty..."

iiiiii

A calm week passed. Harry caught up with Neville and apologized for being so curt (though still adamantly refusing to tell him anything), and Neville reluctantly forgave him. Seamus and Dean hadn't noticed anything, and Ron didn't seem to have picked up on it, either. Ginny and Harry had a similar conversation to the one he had with Neville, but Ginny was not so easily convinced that they weren't shagging in spare broom closets.

"I've seen how closely together you walk in the hallways, the way you keep going into empty classrooms-"

"That's none of your business!" he half-yelled.

"Because this business is so nasty?" she said slyly. Harry avoided speaking with her after this.

Meanwhile, Harry had more time to think about the funny things that had been going on that weren't associated with Hermione. The possible sighting of a Death Eater on his map swam into his thoughts every now and again, though it did no good thinking on it; he still had no idea if it had really happened. The visions, which he had not experienced since Christmas break, still haunted him, and he couldn't help wondering what Voldemort was after. Snape had been less than helpful, and he idly wondered if he should tell Dumbledore about his most recent one.

Strangely enough, just as the students had noticed about himself and Hermione, it seemed to Harry that Ron and Luna were talking more often than before. This puzzled him to no end, as he was under the

impression that Ron thought she was incurably dotty. He asked Ron about this one day.

"Well, you and Hermione have been more chummy since Christmas," Ron said sulkily. "Luna's nice enough, even if she is a bit... well, off. She won't let that Crumple-Snorkel thing go, and she wants to go for rides on thestrals all the time."

"Sorry if it seems like we're ignoring you," Harry said earnestly. "But we had all that time together, and-"

"No, really, it's okay," Ron said, attempting a smile. "And I don't believe those weak rumours about you two knobbing, either. I'm sure if I'd been here instead, Hermione would be the one feeling a bit... left out."

Despite the things Ron wasn't aware of, Harry knew he was probably right; it wasn't just the sharing of a secret (and the many strange events that had resulted from it), but it was also spending nearly two weeks exclusively in each other's company. He and Hermione were now best friends, and as good as that made him feel, he couldn't help feeling like he'd lost Ron somewhat. His emotions were somewhat jumbled and melancholy after that.

When he saw Ron at lunch the following day, however, he was near catatonic.

"Why... can't believe... why did I ever... don't understand..."

"Ron, what's wrong?" he and Hermione asked in unison. Ron clenched his hands on Harry's lapels, sinking to the ground. He and Hermione hastened to support their friend. The poor Weasley looked nothing short of deranged.

"She... she asked... why did she ask..." His eyes were as round as saucers, and his breathing was ragged.

"What did she ask?" Hermione asked quickly.

"WHO asked?" Harry said.

"Loony... Luna asked... oh, why oh why oh why oh wh-"

"What did she ask?!" Hermione hissed, shaking him.

"She asked me... asked me out..."

They let go in shock and Ron fell to the floor.

"Hogsmeade... Valentine's D... D... it's so weird, why did she..."

Harry started laughing. After a moment, Hermione joined him. Ron, too thunderstruck to notice, kept babbling on the floor, his head in his hands. Eventually, when Professor Flitwick came over to investigate, they slapped Ron back to his senses and hauled him off to their house table.

"What did she say, exactly?" Harry asked, still trying to hide his bemused grin.

"It was the most eccentric proposal ever," he breathed. "'Ron Weasley,' she says to me, 'People go on dates on St. Valentine's Day. You and I should go on one, too.' It's like she was giving the weather!"

As if waiting for a signal, Luna started walking over to their table.

"Not a word," Ron hissed.

"Ron," she said, her wand bobbing slightly from its perch behind her ear. "I was just wondering if you'd made up your mind about Hogsmeade. It would be nice to know ahead of time." She did, in fact, say it with the air of someone asking if they'd left a sock at your house mistakenly.

"I'll... let you know," he croaked.

She nodded, and her wand swayed even more. She turned her bulging eyes on Harry. "Harry Potter. You and Hermione Granger have been having sex lately. Is it as enjoyable as the rumours say?"

Harry fell backward off the bench, knocking over his pumpkin juice. Ron covered his face with his palm. Several heads throughout the Great Hall turned, gaping at them. Hermione's eye was twitching, and she looked as if she wanted to dissolve - or wring Luna's neck.

iiii

"Please practice the Stunner and the Impediment Jinx before we meet next," Albus Dumbledore called after the departing students. "I recommend doing it in pairs, of course."

As Harry filed past his desk, however, he found the wrinkled hand of the headmaster blocking his way. A slip of parchment was in it. He looked up, confusion in his eyes.

"Well, go on, then," Dumbledore said, gesturing with the hand holding the paper. His voice was cheerful enough, but it did not reach his eyes. Harry took it, then the headmaster shoed him out.

"What kept you?" Ron asked when he rejoined them further along the hallway.

"I don't know, yet." He unfolded the parchment and read:

Harry Potter,

Professor McGonagall will escort yourself and Hermione Granger to my office this evening at half past six o'clock. Please be in the common room at that time.

Sincerely,

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore

"I didn't know Dumbledore had such a lengthy name," Hermione said.

"What d'you reckon?" Ron said. "It doesn't sound like he wants to pat you on the back."

"Who can say?" Harry crumpled it up and stuffed it in his bag.

"I hope it's nothing to do with us." She sounded quite uneasy. "He may suspect we really are having it away left and right."

"I don't think so. He told me that he doesn't hold with the grapevine."

"Nothing for it but the waiting game, then," Ron said, hands in his pockets.

iiii

"Please, sit."

Hermione sat immediately. Harry hesitated, then followed suit. Dumbledore was behind his desk, his fingertips pressed together in front of his crooked nose much the way Snape had done, a smile playing at the corner of his mouth. Professor McGonagall, also suppressing a smile, strode from the room as soon as Harry sat, the doors closing with a dull thud after her.

"Please, sir-"

"Patience, dear boy."

Harry's brow furrowed. Why had he been asked here to sit on his bum?

But they had barely been there a few minutes when Professor McGonagall returned, and those who accompanied her were the last two people Harry had expected to walk through the doors. Hermione gave a little gasp.

"Mum!!! Dad!!!"

Beaming, she jumped up from her chair and ran to them. Harry couldn't help smiling himself as he watched them embrace, listened to Hermione's delighted laughter and her parents' loving greetings. After a few moments, they all moved toward the desk, and Harry shook hands with Mr. Granger, then was nearly suffocated by his wife.

"Oh, you dear boy, you wonderful-"

"Ehrm-!" That was about all he could manage.

"Please, Jane, you're going to smother the poor lad!" Mr. Granger chided her good-naturedly, a hearty laugh in his tones. Harry noticed his teeth were extremely straight and white, and was reminded forcibly of one Gilderoy Lockhart. "It's that Puckle mollycoddling gene acting up again. Really, dear, control yourself!"

Meanwhile, Hermione was still beside herself with joy. "Mother, Father, it's so great to see you! What are you doing here?"

"Have a seat, all of you," Dumbledore said, the smile having eluded his efforts to subdue it. He conjured up a few extra chairs with a flick of his wand, and though the Grangers jumped slightly, it was much less so than most Muggles would have.

"I don't understand, Professor," Harry began. "I mean... if this is a family visit, why am I here? I'm just in the way."

"In the way?" Mr. Granger said, sounding affronted. "Perish the thought! I daresay you should get in the way more often!"

Hermione smiled. "I sent Mother and Father an owl about my telling you everything, making sure to note how good a friend you are, and how often you've snatched me from the jaws of certain peril. The post they sent back was nearly as long as that one Percy sent Ron last year!"

Harry scoffed. "That unabridged novel? Why so long?"

"Most of it was filled with your praises," she said, looking at her parents now. "I reckon they wanted to express their gratitude in person."

"Yes, exactly," her mother said, her eyes shining, a handkerchief held under one eye. He noticed her hair was barely a hint darker than that of her daughter's, though it was pulled into a bun. "Our dear daughter landing in such dire situations, and you always being there for her... it's no mystery why she chose to confide in you."

Harry's gaze dropped to the floor, a modest smile on his lips.

"Professor," Hermione said, turning to him, "I didn't think parental visits were commonplace at Hogwarts."

"The Grangers insisted so strongly," he said bemusedly. "In fact, I'm not sure how they acquired the owls to deliver such a barrage of post to me. I do understand that it would've been rather impossible for them to visit Harry at the Dursleys', or for him to visit your home, so... well, maybe just this once, I could bend the rules a touch."

Over the next hour, after Professor McGonagall had brought in a tray of tea, pumpkin juice and biscuits, Harry felt himself pinken steadily as Hermione's family cooed over him, asking him questions about various things, commending him on several counts, and generally making a fuss. Eventually, Dumbledore asked Hermione if she would like to show them around the grounds, and she gleefully dragged them through the doors and down the stone steps.

Harry was right behind them until he felt Professor McGonagall's hand grasp his arm.

"Professor Dumbledore would like a quick word with Potter," she said to Hermione, who had glanced behind her and was moving back toward the door. "He will catch up with you afterward."

She hesitated, then flashed him an uncertain smile before skipping back down the steps toward her folks.

Harry spoke before Dumbledore could. "Professor... I take it you know... about Hermione, that is."

"Yes. It was a simple matter of what they'd marked down for 'gender' on her birth certificate. Among the staff, only myself and Professor McGonagall are aware of this fact. I am pleased to see that she has trusted this with another student; it will strengthen her sense of security, of confidence and general well-being - and she would've been hard-pressed to find anyone more worthy."

Harry, the compliment causing him to pinken once again, started to ask him what he thought of it, or why the other teachers hadn't been informed, but at that moment he noticed that Dumbledore seemed to want to discuss something of more importance, and stayed silent.

"The reason I asked for you to remain behind is not quite as pleasant as the Grangers' visit, Harry."

"Voldemort," he said at once. Professor McGonagall blinked, but made no other movement or sound.

"Yes. The visions. Professor Snape has informed me that you had another one shortly before the holidays."

"Yeah... and did he tell you what it was about?"

"He did." Those bright blue eyes were piercing. "Have you had any other visions since?"

"Just one... over Christmas break. It was just like the one at the end of October."

"I see. Denied again, Tom," he said, more to himself than to Harry.

After several lengthening seconds, Professor McGonagall gave a cough, and Dumbledore spoke again.

"Is there anything else you wish to tell me?"

Hesitation. There were more things, but they would make him sound mad... and would also give away his possession of the Marauder's Map, which he would probably be relieved of immediately. He was quite curious as to what Dumbledore would think of his seeing Bellatrix on some bit of parchment, but found he did not want to pay the price of handing over such a treasure - or being perceived as mental by the faculty.

"No, Professor."

To Be Continued

Chapter Ten: My Wonky Valentine

"Well, now! Hermione's kin, are yeh?" Hagrid beamed, setting down the enormous bag of feed he'd been carrying. "Pleasure, pleasure! Come in fer a cuppa!"

"We'd be delighted," Mrs. Granger said nervously, craning her neck slightly to look into the towering man's face.

Hermione was following them inside when she noticed movement out of the corner of her eye. She turned, and saw Harry half-jogging across the lawns toward them. She smiled, waving, and he waved back.

"What did Dumbledore want?" she asked when he was within earshot.

"Visions," he replied shortly, hands braced against his knees as he caught his breath.

"Oh." Her smile faded. "I'd nearly forgotten all about that with recent goings on... anything come of it?"

"Not really." He straightened and let out a gust of air.

"Did you tell him what you saw on the map?"

"No."

"Harry-!"

"I don't want to lose it," he said flatly. "And it's no use saying I saw anything when I can't even believe it wholeheartedly."

She nodded, looking at him intently. "I suppose. Well, er... my parents are inside... shall we?"

"Give me a minute."

He leaned back against a fencepost, calming his breathing, eyes closed. Rather than leave him alone outside, she joined him, standing nearby and silently gazing toward the lake.

"Hermione?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you know of any spells that can... remove curse scars?"

She looked at him. "What?"

"Just what I said." He was staring at the ground in front of him. "I want to know if you've ever come across a spell like that."

"You want to get rid of the lightning bolt."

A nod. She sighed, reaching across his back to grasp the far shoulder.

"Sorry, Harry, I wish I did. I suppose I should've expected you to ask me something like this eventually. But your scar is so unusual; no one's ever survived the Killing Curse before. I'm sure it's a bit trying, living with that thing and all the attention. But it's just a squiggly line."

"It's not. It's a doorway into the mind of a devious madman. I don't want to look through it anymore."

A frown tugged at her mouth, but she ignored it. "I wish I could say I know what you're feeling, what it's like to peek into You-Know-Who's mind, but I don't. If I could do anything to lessen the strain, perhaps share your burden..."

"I wouldn't want that. It's bad enough I have to deal with this without chopping off bits for my friends to hold onto."

She couldn't stave off the frown now. "Oh, Harry..."

The gentle evening winds swept their hair as she stood next to him, massaging his shoulder, his hands thrust into his pockets. Too often had she seen him look as weary and troubled as he did now, and the

dull ache gripped her chest tighter. Eventually, his gaze moved to her face, and he smiled weakly.

"Let's catch up with your folks. I'm sure they're losing teeth in there as we speak, and it wouldn't do for dentists to go home with nothing but gums."

Laughing, they walked toward the door to Hagrid's hut, Hermione's arm still firmly around his slouching shoulders.

iiii

"I don't believe it!"

Harry looked over his shoulder, and was startled himself. He saw Hermione held a similar reaction, though her look was quite darker.

"What does she mean by carrying on with her?!" Ron continued, gritting his teeth.

The three of them started toward the doorway where Cho was standing, talking to the curly-haired girl that had sold them out the previous year.

"Marietta Edgecombe!" Hermione said, nearly shouting already. The several Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs standing around jumped slightly, edging away from what they perceived as a prelude to quite a bitter row. She only stopped when their noses were a Snitch-breadth apart. "You have the nerve to return to our school!"

"I've been here all year," she said indignantly. "You might've noticed me before now!"

"I might've if I'd been searching the dustbins!"

Marietta's eyes flared. "What did you say?"

"You treacherous little shrew! We might've got on fine with our D.A. meetings and Dumbledore might've been able to stay at Hogwarts last year if you hadn't been such a duplicitous, back-stabbing-"

"Lay off!" Cho said, her jaw setting. "You saw to it she got her punishment, didn't you?"

"Get out of it!" Hermione growled, barely sparing her a glance before returning to Marietta. "You can just go on up to your dormitory and pack your trunk, because if you ever cross my field of vision again-"

"You'll what?" Marietta said, backing up and drawing her wand. "Go on, then! Tell us what you'll do!"

Hermione's sparking brown eyes instantly went cold, and she drew her own wand - a gesture that none gathered there took lightly, for they knew of her great intellect, what she could manage with it, and did not much care to remain on the battlefield. Everyone fled the scene, tripping over themselves in their panicked haste, all save her, Marietta, Cho, Harry, and Ron. The latter three even took a leery step backward.

"You don't want find out what I'll do," Hermione said, barely above a whisper, her wand pointed directly ahead. Her voice was not her own, and Harry could almost feel the hate pouring off of her.

Marietta faltered. Though a Ravenclaw and quite sharp herself, it showed on her face that she was also wary of Hermione's prowess. "Go on, then," she repeated, her hand beginning to shake.

"What in the name of Merlin's Beard?!"

They all turned to see Professor McGonagall striding toward them briskly. The two girls immediately stowed their wands.

"I don't believe what I'm seeing!" The deputy headmistress's eyes were wide behind her spectacles, fists at her side. "Hermione Granger, preparing to duel!"

"Professor-"

"This is most unacceptable! I'm afraid I cannot ignore this!"

"Marietta drew first!" Ron shouted.

Hermione was trying not to direct her anger at her Head of House - and failing miserably. "Professor, that sneak handed us to Umbridge last year! How can you allow her to continue attending a school she obviously has no loyalty to?!"

McGonagall's wizened brow wrinkled, and Harry was almost positive her anger abated slightly. However, when she spoke, her tones were just as sharp as they had been. "That gives you no right to hex her in the middle of the hallway! Twenty points from Gryffindor and Ravenclaw!"

A collective groan went up, but McGonagall spoke over them. "It's less than you deserve for such disgraceful behaviour! Now, off to your classes, go on, then!"

As they dispersed, Harry caught sight of Cho's face. To his surprise, her gaze wasn't dripping with animosity - in fact, she looked quite uneasy.

iiiiii

The sun was shining brilliantly on the snow-covered city of Hogsmeade, threatening to melt everything that was frozen. Ron broke an icicle off the end of a nearby signpost, chucking it at another one several meters away.

"Good shot, Ron!" Luna said merrily after it had connected. She was wearing a scarf that appeared to be made of Christmas potholders, as well as that ludicrous zebra-skin hat of hers. "Not such a rubbish Keeper anymore, are you?"

Ron's ears glowed slightly, but he laughed. "Not so much, I guess."

As they neared Zonko's, Harry saw a flutter of raven hair across the High Street. Cho was leaning against an alley wall, arms folded against the cold and looking quite alone.

"I'll catch up with you later," he said to the three of them.

"What?" Hermione followed his gaze, then her own went cold. "You're not going off to talk to her, are you?"

"Why shouldn't he?" Luna asked, mildly interested.

"I want to settle all this."

He could hear them whispering to each other as he stomped across the lane, but he did not turn. As he reached Cho, she looked up, but her eyes only fell on him when he was a few feet away, and she jumped.

"H-Harry!"

"Why are you still talking with that Marietta?"

"What d'you mean? She's not all bad, she just-"

"And why have you been avoiding me? Don't think I haven't noticed that you were giving me quite the berth since you got back from Christmas." When she didn't respond, he said, "Answer me!"

"Er, let's go somewhere else-"

"This seems fine to me," he said quickly.

She hesitated, studying him closely. At last, she sighed. "Okay, look. As for Marietta, she knows I haven't quite forgiven her for what she did last year. But she's my friend. She made a mistake, and I'm not going to chuck her out of my life for it."

Harry nodded curtly; as much as he loathed Marietta, he could understand not wanting to lose a friend you've had for some time (a feeling he'd had to deal with quite recently). He noticed after he'd done so, she began shifting nervously.

"As for me avoiding you... I didn't know if you really wanted to talk to me anymore, now that you and Hermione Granger are an item."

His jaw slackened, but he quickly collected himself. "We are NOT an item!"

"I didn't think so, either... at first." Her voice was small, and she looked as if she'd rather not have this discussion. "I heard the rumours, but it sounded so silly that I didn't believe them - I certainly didn't want to. But I've seen you two in the halls... how close you walk, the meaningful glances, the whispering... either you're a couple, or you're planning to blow up the school."

Harry found he could not speak. How could Cho actually buy into that bilge?

"I liked you, Harry," she said, her eyes beginning to glisten. "I really did, and I- I still do... but far be it from me to stand in the way of love. You and Hermione Granger have known each other for much longer, it was bound to happen. You don't have to lie to me."

"But I'm NOT LYING!" he shouted, and she cringed. "Hermione and I are just really close mates, I swear! There's nothing more than conversation going on between us! I am not in love with Hermione!"

To his increased annoyance, her gaze was skeptical, but it quickly gave way to amazement. "Oh, wow. You don't even know, yet."

"What?"

She smiled sadly. "You're blissfully unaware that you fancy her. That's so sweet... and so tragic..."

"I DO NOT-!"

"Harry, please, can I just... just go?"

He blinked as he noticed she was crying. He hadn't seen when the tears had actually begun rolling down her cheeks, and her voice was barely cracking. At the same time, he saw she was backing away.

"Ch-Cho, wait-"

"I can't do this. As much as I want to, I can't bar your path to her heart."

"Cho!"

And with that, she ran down the alleyway, her hands covering her face.

"Is it me," he said slowly to the empty space, "or have I just been dumped by a girl I'm not even dating... because of another I'm not dating?" He slid down the brick wall into the snow. "Women are so weird."

iiii

"Harry!"

His eyes snapped open, and slowly focused on Hermione's concerned face, hovering inches from his own.

"Oh, thank God, Harry! Are you okay, what happened?"

He slowly realized he was still crouched in the snow, exactly where he'd slid down. He glanced at his watch, and realized he'd been sitting there for nearly an hour.

"Nothing," he said, realizing his throat was quite dry. He'd been trying to sort out what Cho had said, and undoubtedly nodded off after he came up blank.

"But... but Harry, why are you just sitting here in the snow?"

"I'm fine," he repeated more firmly. "Where's Ron and Luna?"

"They're in the Three Broomsticks," she said as she helped him to his feet. "We started to worry about you, and I volunteered to hunt you down."

"Kind of you," he said distractedly. "Let's go catch up with them."

The moment they entered the tavern, Ron waved them over. Hermione ordered two tankards of butterbeer as Harry dropped heavily into a chair at their table.

"Where've you been, mate? You and Cho 'make up'?" He winked as he said the last two words.

"Nothing of the sort," he said glumly. When Hermione returned, he related the ridiculous events of an hour previous to them. By the time he finished his tale, Ron's head was shaking in disbelief, Luna had a thoughtful expression on her face, and Hermione's arms were crossed in exasperation.

"Honestly, we should have a big falling out in the middle of the hall just so everyone doesn't think we're together," she said.

"They'd just say you were having a lover's quarrel," Ron put in.

"Ron's probably right," Harry said resignedly.

"You mean..." Luna said slowly. "You mean you two aren't fucking?"

They all blinked, and Hermione's face set slightly.

"No, we aren't fucking!" Harry retorted heatedly. "We are not, haven't been, nor will we be in the near future!"

"Oh," she said simply. "What a pity, I was looking forward to the wedding. I like weddings, they're quite interesting. Some of them are performed in the nude, and others in those flying machines Muggles use. I wonder if anyone's ever combined the two ideas...?"

The other three collectively clapped a hand over their faces.

"All due respect, I think you're well shut of her," Hermione said crossly. "Refusing to see that Edgecombe for what she is! And she can't be very bright for a Ravenclaw if she thinks we're a couple... or rather, that we 'haven't realized our undying love yet'. Preposterous!"

Harry sighed, drawing deeply on his tankard and setting it down. "It's so stupid. She just flat-out refused to believe me. There's nothing else I could have said to convince her, is there?"

"Nothing I can think of, mate," Ron said, shrugging. "Don't worry about it. Maybe she'll come around later or something."

"Forget that rubbish," Hermione said firmly. "We're in Hogsmeade for the day, and we might as well enjoy it."

"Yeah," Ron said, the corners of his mouth turning up a bit. "We haven't been to Honeydukes yet, and I'm out of Frogs and Whizbees again... maybe I'll pick up a Sugar Quill or two?"

"You're going to bore a hole straight through your teeth and out the back of your head at this rate!" she shot at him as they stood. "Moderation, Ronald!"

"If I get a load of cavities, I can fill them back in. The whole wizardry thing, you know."

She rolled her eyes and strode from the table.

iiii

In the weeks that followed, Harry made it a point to walk closer to Ron than Hermione, and to avoid being solely in her company if at all possible. Hermione understood the reason, of course, and also attempted to keep her distance. It seemed to do nothing at all to deter the whispers that they were starting to date, but mercifully, few students thought they were knobbing - not yet, at any rate. Even so, Harry found himself an unwilling object of lust. He overheard several fourth-year girls airily discussing possible ways to steal him away from his beloved Hermione, and was on the point of telling them off before he realized it would mean admitting he was eavesdropping.

"You have 'the scent'," Ron said, miming quotation marks on either side of his head.

"What's 'the scent'?" Harry said, repeating the action.

"I'll tell you about 'the scent' -"

"Enough with the fingers, Ron," Harry said, and Ron stopped mid-movement. "Just tell me what you're on about!"

"Okay, all the girls think you're spoken for, now, right?"

"Right," he said grudgingly.

"Well, that suddenly makes you more appealing. Not only are you famous, but you're also off the market. Now they have no hope of getting you, and that makes them want you ten times as much."

"But that's stupid!"

He shrugged. "Nature of the beast."

"HONESTLY!" exclaimed Ginny, who had been listening. She slammed her schoolbook shut and stomped off toward the dormitory stairs.

"What's twisting her knickers?" Ron said, taken aback.

In the meantime, Harry learned that Ron was having similar trouble. Luna had told everyone that they'd kissed after their date in Hogsmeade.

"She's a lot quicker than she looks!" Ron had replied indignantly to Harry's question. "She just snogged me on the mouth with no forewarning, there was nothing I could do!"

"So you didn't enjoy it, then?"

Ron's ears shone like beacons.

March wore on, and their homework had certainly not lessened any. They'd begun working faster, attempting to actually leave themselves some free time on the weekends. No such luck; one Saturday evening found them toiling in the library for hours on end.

"Maybe if we can finish these two essays tonight, we can have tomorrow off," Ron said wearily.

"Oh, for goodness' sake," Hermione said impatiently, striding around the table and sitting between them. "You two would wither up and die without me, wouldn't you?"

"Don't have to be so conceited," Ron grumbled.

Harry had taken to hiding out for hours on end in his room. When asked what he was doing, he would shrug and say, "Studying, of course." Hermione and Ron suspected this was a lie, but could never really catch him at whatever he was actually doing, so eventually they let the subject drop.

Cho Chang had not changed her opinion of Harry and Hermione. Both of them and Ron, independently and jointly, had tried to make her see reason - without a hint of progress. Her mind was made up, and she was determined not to do anything to jeopardize their obvious destiny. When it was apparent she could not be swayed, they gave up and started avoiding her altogether.

This had served to make the Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw a very strange one for Harry. As he and Cho played the same position, they kept passing in the air, and more than once Harry was tempted to wave or yell something out before remembering that she didn't want to talk to him. He dwelled so deeply on this that Cho almost caught the Snitch before him; suddenly realizing it was hovering right next to his elbow, he swerved in front of her hand, then executed a barrel roll and grasped the tiny thing to tumultuous applause. She was far less inclined to speak to him after that.

Eventually, quite sick of fighting the rumours of their love, Harry and Hermione had turned to a new tactic: they began holding hands in the hallways, cheerfully telling anyone who asked that they were so mad over each other that they were thinking of getting tattoos. Of course, they had told the majority of their friends they were going to do this beforehand, and they were more than willing to help fan the flames.

"Oh, yeah, they're a cute couple, aren't they?" Harry overheard Neville telling a third-year Hufflepuff. "I always knew they'd end together."

It did the trick. Though now they looked as if they were clearly an item, at least people stopped talking about it - after all, why discuss something that you can observe?

"Harry, would you mind terribly buttering my toast for me?"

"Of course, my love."

Ginny giggled, watching him do so as if it were the most important task in the world.

"Here you are!" He held it up for Hermione to bite into, and she did so, a saccharine smile lighting up her features as crumbs fell from her lips. As Harry leaned across and planted a loud, cheeky peck on top of the crumbs, Dean Thomas rolled his eyes, and Ginny nearly fell under the table.

"There went my appetite," Ron muttered, dropping his spoon into his porridge.

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"I'm certainly glad."

Harry turned in all directions. Someone had spoken, but the corridor was empty.

"Who's there?"

Cho Chang walked out of the shadow of a statue, smiling sadly.

"I'm glad you finally realized your love. You two look incredibly happy together, and I wish you all the best."

Harry sighed. "Oh, please."

"Come again?"

"It's an act!" he said, dropping his schoolbag. "We're just putting on a show for the mindless children! It was either that or keep enduring the questions!"

Cho snorted. "Why do I not believe that? You know, I really thought you'd be up front with me, as I was the one that informed you of your love."

He could feel his eyebrows shoot beyond the top of his head. "So now you want credit for it?! As if you orchestrated the entire thing?!"

"Of course not! But I at least thought you'd be honest with me!"

"I'M NOT LYING!" he shouted. "Hermione and I aren't dating! We're just sick of being accused of rogering like dogs in heat, so we figure if we act like a happy little couple, they'll leave us alone! And it is working, isn't it?!"

To his confusion, her face was now quite cold and expressionless. "Well, I'm certainly glad you have each other now. Obviously, you don't want to include me in your life, so I suppose this is where we part."

"Wh-what?"

"I'll be seeing you, Harry Potter... but I daresay I won't be talking to you ever again."

As she walked swiftly down the hall, he could feel his blood boiling, even though he had no idea what had just taken place. He punched the wall as hard as he could, not caring that his hand would be throbbing afterward.

"I bet the wall really appreciates that," Hermione said bemusedly.

"Sod off."

She whipped off the Invisibility Cloak and crammed it into the bag he'd left on the floor. "Sorry, but I couldn't help overhearing... I mean,

your voices carried down to the second floor. Cho was way out of line, Harry," she said earnestly. "You didn't deserve that."

He gritted his teeth as he shook his hand out. "What are you doing here, anyway? And why did you have my cloak?"

"I was in the kitchens, talking to the house-elves. I, er... wanted to have another go with it before I returned it. You don't mind, do you?"

The anxious look on her face made him shake his head, his anger starting to lessen. "Why were you talking to the house-elves? Not still on about that Spew, are you?"

"S.P.E.W.!!!" she shrieked. Harry smiled, and she let out a gust. "And no. I've just had a long conversation with them, trying to convince them one last time to stand up for themselves. It's no good, they don't want to be freed."

"That's what we've been telling-"

"I know, I know." His smile fell as he saw how much her shoulders were sagging in defeat. "I give up. Maybe I can do something to help them eventually - perhaps after we graduate - but for the nonce, I'll just have to let them stick it out. Besides, they get treated fairly enough here at Hogwarts, at least..."

Harry knew she did not want to let her Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare die out like this, but there was little he could do, either. He picked up his bag and clapped a hand on her shoulder, leading the dejected would-be liberator gently back toward the Gryffindor common room.

To Be Continued

Chapter Eleven: Consternation Descends

"Who wrote the Proclamation of 1818, again?"

Hermione looked up, her eyes reproachful. "It's on that page!" She indicated his book with the end of her quill.

Ron grumbled and bent over the book, scanning it carefully. "Ahh, there we go. Could've just told me, though," he said as he scratched out a sentence.

"Could just do the work," she muttered.

The beginning of May had arrived, bringing heavy rains, exams ever nearer, and their homework load to a level of absurdity they hadn't thought possible. Ron was barely scraping Acceptables in his classes, and Harry's already-sporadic Outstandings were becoming fewer and fewer. Hermione, though she looked decidedly less perky than usual, enjoyed a steady stream of O's, and passed the time Ron and Harry were still doing homework by idly researching elf rights, reading thick novels, doodling, or simply napping. Ron voiced that this was really quite annoying of her, and seemed to think she was flaunting her brain in their faces.

"I can't help it if I'm more gifted than you are!" she had said hotly.

"You could stop doing your homework and let us catch up!"

"Oh, of course, I'm sorry! Why haven't I been trying to make myself as stupid as Ronald? Obviously, that's what I should've been doing all along!"

Harry had pointed out that the tension of all the extra work had stretched their nerves quite thin, and tried to suggest a break, but they didn't seem to hear him over their own shouting. Finally, they calmed down a touch, and Harry reiterated his proposal, which they thought was a great one. A few minutes later found them strolling around the castle.

"I shouldn't have said you were stupid," Hermione said. "Just because you don't have book smarts or high marks doesn't mean you are."

"Apology accepted," Ron said rather coldly, though it soon became apparent that he really had forgiven her.

With no forewarning, Harry stopped walking. His friends turned to look at him, and saw that his face had gone pale and his eyes were closed. His hand flew to his forehead.

"Harry?" Ron ventured.

"Not again," he whispered.

"Is it...?" Hermione breathed.

"Voldemort."

Ron and Hermione exchanged dark looks, then put their hands on Harry's shoulders. "It's okay," she whispered.

He blinked and opened his eyes. "It's stopped... just now."

"What did you see?" Ron asked.

"More heard than saw. He said... he said he's going to kill me - tonight. ...and then the laugh."

Harry shivered. When he looked into his friends' faces again, he saw they were quite alarmed.

"Dumbledore," Hermione said simply.

"No, I don't-"

"We're going to Dumbledore!" she insisted, her thumb digging into his collarbone.

"Alright," he said quickly. "Let's get on with it, then."

They had barely gone a few meters when the man they were going to see stormed around the corner, silvery hair flowing behind him, his expression grave.

"Professor-!"

"Sorry, important matters," he said dismissively. They turned quickly, trotting alongside him.

"But Professor, I've just-"

"Return to your dormitories!" Professor McGonagall snapped. Harry wondered briefly how he'd failed to notice she was there, but that held about as much importance as a toenail clipping at a time like this. He cleared his throat, and spoke in high, chilling tone.

"You have eluded me for the last time, Harry. This night will be your undoing."

Everyone stopped dead, and all eyes turned to him. His gaze was concentrated determinedly on Dumbledore's blue eyes, which held that intense glare they so often did when trying to determine something.

"Return to your dormitories," he said, more firmly and less rushed than McGonagall had done. "I must speak with Hagrid before we leave." This last bit was more to himself than to the students staring at him.

"You aren't going somewhere!" Ron's question came out as a demand.

"I'm afraid we must," he said, now speaking in quicker tones. "Urgent business involving our grim old friends."

Harry realized by the inflection put on "grim old" that he meant Grimmauld, and nodded. Ron and Hermione made movements to follow the two professors as they dashed down the hallway, but Harry stopped them.

"They probably already know what's going on," he said, his stomach sinking. "Maybe Voldemort's attacking the Ministry or something."

"But V-Voldemort said-"

"I know," he cut across her. "Who knows what he's planning."

"Maybe he's after another weapon?" Ron suggested. "Something else to get you with? I mean, he probably wasn't too happy about you nicking the last one..."

"I know who we can ask," he said quietly.

"Who?"

iiii

Dumbledore's office seemed much darker than it ever had, and Harry was sure it wasn't only because the sun had just set. Fawkes was not on his perch, and the majority of the paintings of previous headmasters were empty. He resolutely walked to the fireplace and started searching around it.

"Awfully long password," Hermione said, rushing to aid him. "How did you know it?"

"I didn't, I was just guessing. Dumbledore's password is always some kind of sweet he fancies. Guess he's found his taste for Every Flavour Beans again.... ah, here we go."

He had just taken the lid off of a small snuffbox; as he suspected, it contained the powder he needed. Without further delay, he tossed it into the fireplace, and emerald flames erupted as if they'd been burning there for ages. He took a deep breath, leapt into the fire, and spoke as clearly as possible.

"Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place!"

He shut his eyes against the swirl of colour, arms tight at his sides, until he could feel himself settling into the grate he needed. As he

opened them again, he saw the dank kitchen that had played host to innumerable meetings of the Order of the Phoenix. He strode from the hearth quickly, and he could hear Ron and Hermione arrive behind him as he flung the door open.

"FILTHY TRAITORS!!!"

"Shit."

"SCUM OF THE EARTH!" screamed the hideous painting to his left. "MUDBLOODS, FOUL CREATURES OF-"

"Help me!" he wailed to his friends as they joined him. After a few moments' struggle, they managed to shut the curtains, and the painting fell silent. He waved them forward, and they crept down the hallway.

"I wonder if a good 'silencio' would work on her," Ron whispered.

"I'm sure they've tried it before," Hermione hissed.

They quickly searched the upstairs landings, but with no luck. None of the rooms were occupied, but Buckbeak was still in Mrs. Black's old room. The hippogriff clawed at the ground when they entered, screeching with joy. The three hurried over (Ron nervously bowing first) and gave him a quick pat, then Hermione tossed a dead ferret lying nearby into his mouth, which he snapped up hungrily.

"If only Buckbeak could tell us where they've gone," Harry said.

"I suppose you were looking for Moody or Moony?" Ron said.

"Yes, er... well, anyone, really... but I guess they've been alerted to whatever Dumbledore was... or perhaps they were the ones that told him."

"Either way, there's nothing to be done here," Hermione said, still petting Buckbeak affectionately. "Let's just go back to Hogwarts."

"I suppose you're right," he sighed. They all gave the hippogriff another fleeting pat and said their goodbyes, then hurried from the room.

"At least we didn't run into Kreacher," Ron said as they descended the steps from Dumbledore's office.

"Ron, that's not nice," Hermione said.

"Hang on." Harry's stride quickened. "Why didn't I think of that before we wasted all that Floo powder?"

"What?" they chorused.

"What did Dumbledore say right after I'd told him about my vision?"

"To return to the dorms," Ron said.

"And then?"

Hermione's eyes flew open. "Hagrid!"

They flew down hall after hall, staircase after staircase, finally sprinting past the hourglasses tallying the House Points. For some reason, Harry took note that Hufflepuff was just ahead of Gryffindor before they sprinted outside and across the darkening lawns.

"Hey-!"

Hermione and Ron stopped just after Harry had. "What, what's going on?" Ron said anxiously. "Not another 'scar trip!'"

"No, look!"

He pointed into the Forbidden Forest, and they saw what he meant. A pair of glowing, evil eyes were peering out at them.

"It's the same ones as before!" he said, stalking toward them and drawing his wand.

"What d'you mean, 'before'?" Ron squeaked, hesitantly following.

"Nevermind that, now, come on!"

The three of them broke into a run, chasing the spot where the eyes had just vanished. As they stumbled through the trees, a sense of foreboding crept up on Harry, one that had nothing to do with the absence of light.

"Something's off," he whispered. "Something's not right."

"I feel it, too," Hermione whispered.

"I just feel like I don't want to be here," Ron croaked. "It's so- oh, bother..."

A biting wind swept through the woods as no less than ten dementors emerged from the shadows. Their ragged, echoing breaths gripped the hearts of the three humans huddled together, draining the warmth from them, and their disfigured, rotting hands stretched outward, clawing at their prey.

Without further delay, Ron and Hermione drew their wands. The three of them screwed up their faces, concentrating, and shouted as one, "EXPECTO PATRONUM!!!"

Ron produced a good size cloud of silvery vapour, but a shining stag erupted from the end of Harry's wand at once, charging toward the nearest dementor and forcing it back. He glanced over and saw a shimmering otter had joined the fray, and remembered this to be Hermione's Patronus. After two more shouts, Ron had been able to conjure his - and Harry suppressed a laugh. What else would it be but an oversize weasel?

The dementors, realizing their defeat, fluttered away over the ground, tattered black cloaks fluttering, seeming to slip between the trees like liquid. The three Patronuses cantered for a moment, waiting for another attack, then faded away when none came.

"That was close," Ron said as he sagged to the ground, panting. "But now I feel like I've just swum the Channel."

"You haven't practiced enough," Hermione said, slightly out of breath herself. "But I'm proud of you, you did it!"

"I'm proud of you both." Sweat had barely begun to form on his forehead. "I knew you could do it, of course, but our little club never had a chance to test against a real dementor, or even a fake one. Good work."

They beamed weakly at him. It was in that moment that two things reached Harry's ears; a distant barking, and a low growl that was much closer.

"D'you hear that?"

"It sounds like growling... what-"

And Ron's question was answered for him. As it moved out from behind one of the trees, the three of them gaped at the snarling animal. It had high shoulders, and a thin, mohawk-like mane graced the top of its head. Its teeth were bared, and saliva was dripping from its fangs.

"Whatever that thing is, it's hungry!" Ron squeaked, scrambling to his feet.

"Stay back!" Harry shouted, pointing his wand at it.

To his surprise, the creature seemed to smile. Then it produced a high, chilling cackle, one that seemed to cut through his skin like nails on a chalkboard.

"It's a spotted hyena!" Hermione whispered. "But what on earth is one doing loose in Britain?"

Before they could debate this topic, the creature flung itself at Ron, who was still closest. He rolled out of the way, and Harry aimed a kick at its dark muzzle, connecting sickeningly. The beast rolled away

from him, whimpering for a moment before its laughter returned. It circled them, snarling and laughing, its teeth snapping at intervals.

"What do we do?" Ron whispered. "Can we stun it?"

"I don't know," Harry said. "I've never had to fight a hyena before!"

"Of course, we- OH!"

Harry whirled, and saw another dementor bearing down on them. Hermione hurriedly shouted "Expecto Patronum!", resurrecting her otter to chase it away.

"Will it never end?" Ron moaned.

They turned as one to the threat of the animal again, and what they saw made them freeze. It was standing on its hind legs, and seemed to be growing.

"What the bloody fuck?!" Ron breathed.

"Ron!" Hermione hissed. "Language!"

"You're fussed with THAT at a time like THIS?!" he hissed back.

Harry started to tell them to shut up, but at that moment it became apparent why the hyena was mutating. A black snout turned lighter, and became a bleeding nose. The mane grew into long, dark, straggly hair. The eyes stayed just as sunken and devious, but became slightly more human, and heavy lids appeared over them. To their slowly-rising terror, staring down at them was the Azkaban-hollowed face of Bellatrix Lestrange.

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"Bloody teachers, heaping the homework on us like this. Makes me ill."

"But you have finish, Draco," Pansy Parkinson whined as he threw down his quill. "You don't want to repeat sixth year, do you?"

"Of course I don't, stupid," he spat. "If only my father could pull some strings, get this load of cinderblocks off our shoulders..."

"But he can't," Crabbe muttered.

"I know he can't, you blathering oaf! I'm allowed to sulk, aren't I?!"

"Come on, Draco," Pansy pleaded. "You've only a few more inches to go, let's just-"

They all blinked. Evidently, none of them were imagining it.

"Did you hear a scream?" Malfoy asked aloud. They all nodded. "Wonder what it was..."

"It sounded like it came from outsi-" She broke off when she saw the look on his face. "Draco, don't, you have to finish your-"

"I'm investigating," he said, sinister grin spreading as he stood from the table. "It's about time something amusing happened in this damnable place."

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"No... no, it- it can't be, it's impossible-"

"Surprised, are we?" Bellatrix said in that mock-baby voice she loved to use. "Ickle Harry Potter not used to seeing Animagi?"

The three of them made to raise their wands, but Bellatrix had hers trained on Harry's heart instantly. She let out a quiet chuckle.

"Drop them," she said shortly.

They hesitated. Three on one were good odds, but they did not want to see what happened to the one of them she could attack before the other two could take her down. Harry became aware that they seemed to be waiting for his orders.

"I said drop your wands!" Her voice was louder the second time, and Harry tensed.

Suddenly, he heard the barking again, and realized it was coming from the general direction of Hogwarts. He glanced that way, but nothing was there. As his eyes moved back to Bellatrix, however, he realized her gaze was still lingering, trying to find the source of the noise.

Without hesitation, he raised his wand and fired red sparks high into the air. He was satisfied to see a few flew above the treetops.

"Insufferable PRAT!" she screeched when she realized what he'd done. She raised her wand, but Hermione was ready.

"Expelliarmus!" she shouted, and Bellatrix's wand was flying into the air.

"Damn," she growled, her hands curling into fists. "You meddlesome Mudblood, I swear I'll get you for this!"

"No sudden movements," Hermione said fiercely, her wand still trained on Bellatrix. "Don't make me do something I'll regret."

"Oh?" the Death Eater said, smiling to show blackening teeth. "The dear, sweet girl doesn't want to sully her hands? How very noble!"

"SHUT UP!" Ron snapped, his wand also trained on Bellatrix.

That was when a crashing reached their ears.

"Something's coming this way," Harry breathed. "We-"

Bellatrix ran for it, and Ron shouted "Stupefy!" The jet of red light from his wand hit her squarely in the back, and she pitched forward into the brush.

"Good shot," Harry said, grinning. Ron scratched the back of his head sheepishly.

Then the trees next to them erupted, and an enormous form flung itself forward.

"HAGRID!" they all shouted.

iiiiii

As Draco Malfoy marched into the entrance hall, light flashed from the window. He dashed to it as quickly as he could, and saw red stars glimmering above the trees of the Forbidden Forest.

"Something's going on in there," he whispered. He made for the door, but was startled to see someone standing there.

"Exams will be upon us in less than two months, Mr. Malfoy," Snape said quietly. "Surely no one from my house would be foolish enough to abandon their studies for a walk in the evening air."

"Of- of course not, Professor," he said hurriedly. "I was just-"

"Are you aware that there will be quite a deluge this night?" he continued as if Malfoy had said nothing. "The final Quidditch match of the year is nearing, and it would not do for our Seeker to be waylaid due to 'the sniffles'."

"I- yes, sir, but-"

"Back to the common room, Malfoy."

He stood there for a moment, studying Snape's cold, dark eyes, then strode back the way he'd come.

iiiiii

"Blimey, you three!" Hagrid bellowed, his chest heaving fit to burst. "You all righ'? What in Merlin-?"

"Look!" Harry said, pointing to the woman sprawled on the forest floor.

"I still don' understand," he continued, bushy eyebrows knitting. Fang, his boarhound, gamboled around them, sniffing at everything. "Who-WHAT?!"

Ron had just rolled her over, and Hagrid obviously recognized her.

"But wha' in hell is tha' horrid Lestrage woman doin' here?!" he roared, half-confused and half-infuriated. The few birds left in the surrounding trees took off for quieter parts of the forest.

"To kill me," Harry said at once. "Sneaking in here as a hyena to snuff me. I'm sure of it, I'm sure that's what Voldemort was talking about."

"Ohh..." Hagrid leaned against a nearby tree, and it groaned under his weight. "That's righ', Dumbledore warned me abou' yer dream before he lef'. Said You-Know-Who's about ter try somethin'."

"You... wouldn't happen to know what's going on, do you?" Ron asked hesitantly.

"Yeh mean with the Order," Hagrid said, sighing. "Wouldn' tell yeh if I did know. But it's somethin' big, I could suss tha' ou' easy enough."

"Well, I hope the danger's passed, now," Hermione whispered. "I mean, between her and the dementors-"

"Galloping Grindylows! Dementors, even?!" Hagrid stood. "C'mon, let's ge' you three outta the forest!"

"But what about-?"

"AVADA KEDAVRA!!!"

Horror gripped Harry like it had never done before, liquifying every last cell in his brain. Time seemed to have forgotten quite how to elapse as he turned, and realized Bellatrix Lestrage had found her wand and had quietly risen to her feet, training it on him. It almost seemed funny to him that she was glowing green - it made her look like a shriveled watermelon. As the light slowly grew, and he raised his wand on instinct, it was suddenly cut off. As the darkness flashed, he realized it was falling, and the next thing that reached his brain was an unrecognisable anguished scream and Hagrid's furious bellow.

He saw, as if in a dream, Bellatrix scoop something from the ground and sprint away from them. Dimly, he put together that she had taken something, and that just couldn't be allowed. Without realizing exactly what he would be getting, he raised his wand and shouted, "Accio!"

Instantly, Bellatrix slipped onto her back as the mass huddled in her arms lurched backward and toward Harry. He could tell that whatever it was was quite furry, but had no more time to think about it before it was in his arms. He realized it was somewhat heavy, and he could barely support it. Bellatrix scrambled to her feet again, morphing back into a hyena, and the beast pelted into the woods.

"BACK TO THE CASTLE!!!" Hagrid thundered, tearing after her. Harry started to follow him, but another arm pulled him in the opposite direction. He struggled before a voice spoke to him.

"Let's d-do what Hagrid said, Harry!"

The voice sounded so unnaturally grief-stricken that he couldn't figure out whom it belonged to. As they stumbled from the woods and across the lawn, he could hear weeping, and realized a light mist had started. Barking reached his ears again, but it was fading rapidly. Finally shaking off the mental haze of his near-death experience, he turned to see who was pushing him forward.

"Ron!"

Tears flowed unfettered down his freckled face. "Let's, let's keep going," he choked out, no conviction present in his words.

Slowly, painfully, unmercifully, comprehension fell into his head as the rain gently began to fall in earnest. Hagrid was bloodthirstily chasing after Bellatrix Lestrange. Ron looked so devastated...

Harry's grip slackened, and he let the limp form of Hermione fall from his arms and onto the damp ground.

To Be Continued

Chapter Twelve: So Desperate In Our Sorrow

Numb.

Harry Potter had forgotten how to feel. His mind had gone blank, and his heart felt of stained glass; at the moment, it seemed impossible - laughable, even - that he would ever feel anything resembling emotion again. How could this have happened, right here at Hogwarts? Not here, not now...

Not to her.

"Hah!" he heard a voice say from his shoulder. "Snippy little Mudblood Her-whiny finally got what was coming to her, eh?"

His blood ran as if ice had been injected into his veins. Before he really realized who was speaking, he already had Malfoy by the neck of his robes, dangling above the ground, his wand-hand curled into a fist, raised to strike. Malfoy glanced around for Crabbe and Goyle, his faithful toadies, on instinct, but for once, they were not with him.

"Wh-wha- how'd you get so-"

"What did you say?"

Malfoy's eyes were round with fear, and his voice was nearly an octave higher than it usually was. "I- I didn't-"

"I don't care what your opinion is on Voldemort-" Draco winced "-or how pureblood you are. I don't care how annoying she was to you, and how much you despised the fact that her parents were Muggles. You do not speak ill of the dead. Especially not if I wouldn't."

Despite how badly he was shaking, Malfoy managed to grit his teeth. "Not m-many Mudbloods can say they actually laid a h-hand on me. If somebody hadn't killed her, I w-would've, eventually."

Harry's green eyes flashed so malevolently that the next thing from his mouth actually came out in parseltongue. A loud thunderclap sounded, and Malfoy screamed.

"You," Harry said in a low, growling voice, attempting to compose himself, "you would wish someone dead for a single slap in the face."

"Y-you make it sound so trivial-"

"IT IS TRIVIAL!!! You spineless, worthless sack of goblin shit!!! You strut around the castle like my father used to- all full of himself, thinking the world was born so he could play with it!"

Draco's fear gave a little with confusion. "Your father-?"

"Your cronies swarm around you like bouncers, keeping you from fighting your own battles, keeping you from actually having any real friends! You are the most pathetic little worm I've ever seen! And you have the gall to laugh when someone else's friend dies!" Malfoy opened his mouth, but Harry closed it for him with a swift jab to the nose. "I'm not done talking, yet!!!"

Malfoy head bobbed up and down, blood streaming down his face.

"No," Harry said quietly. "No, I think I am."

He flung the disheveled blond boy to the ground, where he slid a few inches in the forming mud. He scrambled to his feet, ready to face his enemy - but Harry's wand was still out, and he was already pointing it at Draco's heart when he attempted to go for his own.

"Here's a fun little riddle, Lucius Junior. Do you know what curse is as green as my eyes?"

Malfoy's face took on a look of puzzlement, then broke into sheer terror.

"No... no, you... not you, you could never do it, you don't have the guts-"

"WHO NEEDS THE GUTS WHEN YOU HAVE THE FURY?!" Harry shouted, his eyes burning, his wet hair rippling in wind that wasn't there - that his rage was creating. "Avad-"

"NO!!!"

Ron had flung himself at Harry's back, slippery fingers grabbing his wand hand and lifting it from its bead on Malfoy's chest. "He's not worth it, Harry! He's not worth Azkaban!"

Harry stiffened at the word "Azkaban". He shrugged Ron off and said, "You're right." He slowly walked forward, his wand pointed at the Slytherin's throat. Tears of despair and hatred were playing at his eyes, but his voice was low and crystalline.

"Listen to me closely, you bastard. Hermione is dead. She was killed by one of your dad's mates. Your dad is a murderer, and runs with murderers. You would do well to avoid following in his footsteps if you ever want to make any of your own. Ron may have stopped me today, but I swear, solemnly, here and now: If you ever make fun of Hermione, or Cedric, or anyone else who's lost their life fighting your dad's boss..." His voice dropped to an even quieter, more dangerous tone. "And if I ever find you've helped kill any of my friends, however minimal your role... I will find you, and I will watch your face glow green before it goes cold. I will watch your corpse burn until there is nothing left but ashes, which I will then spit upon and scatter to the corners of the earth. Do not cross me in this matter. Do you get me?"

Detached horror had rooted itself deeply in Draco Malfoy's pointed features. It seemed that he had never thought Harry Potter, beloved hero of the wizarding world and royal pain in the posterior, vaunted St. Potter that regularly defeated the villain as if he were going for a mid-morning walk, could say something so dark, so disquieting, so... evil.

"DO YOU GET ME?!"

Draco nodded, whimpering.

He raised his leg and kicked Malfoy in the hip, sending him to the ground.

"Get out of here." He waited for him to run, but he did not. "MOVE YOUR STUPID ARSE BEFORE I REMOVE IT!!!"

And Malfoy was tearing across the lawns and through the front doors. Harry sent a Stunner over his shoulder, just to reinforce the point.

Harry's blood was getting tired of going from freezing to boiling; he still couldn't tell which it was at the moment. He was still drawing ragged breaths in rage, but his mind slowly crawled away from the anger and toward the anguish.

Hermione. Gone. Those two words did not belong together. Hermione could not be dead, it was an impossibility - and yet, as he stood there, staring at her lifeless body, he could not deny it. Her lips were not the light pink colour they ought to be, and her half-open eyes had lost that sheen; that knowing glint when she had just realized something she'd been mulling over for ages, the sharp look when she knew he or Ron were up to something and disapproved. His wand fell from his hand as he sank to his knees, shaking, falling over her wet, limp form. Brave, sweet Hermione, his Hermione - he couldn't trouble himself to fathom or deny that now - had given her life for him. So unselfishly, she had taken the full brunt of the Killing Curse so that he might see another tomorrow... and she had perished, and was never coming back. As he fell, he noticed Ron was already kneeling beside her, mouth moving but only making croaks, tears streaming down his face and mixing with the rainwater as he held her still-warm hand.

Wait...

Though he felt as if he could die with grief, swallowed in the dark sadness, a pinprick of light turned up in the forefront of his mind... "still-warm hand". He felt her other one - indeed, she barely felt colder than she had when alive. A gear turned, an idea clicked into place.

This was not going to happen again.

"I need to borrow Pigwidgeon."

"Wh-what for?" Ron wailed, great drops falling from his cheeks onto Hermione's arm.

"I need to send a letter to Charlie, and I'm betting Pig will find him faster, won't he?"

"But wh-what's Charlie got to d-d-do with anything?!"

"Ron!" Harry shouted, and Ron jumped. He took a breath, then continued, clear and steady. "Time is of the essence, and we've - i've - wasted enough as it is! If we're going to save Hermione, we've got to work quickly!"

iiii

Ron was still in fits when Harry returned from the owlry, but he had done as Harry had asked; he had brought Hermione's lifeless body to Moaning Myrtle's lavatory, towed it off, and was now holding a goblet just under his chin as his large tears fell into it. Myrtle was not there; he supposed she was visiting the prefect bathroom or the lake.

"What the b-b-bloody hell is going on, Harry?" he demanded the instant he'd seen him enter.

"Give me the goblet," he said, kneeling on Hermione's other side. Ron handed it over obediently, and Harry peered inside. "More than enough. You're a good friend, Ron."

Ron just stared at him, apparently at a loss for words. Harry quickly felt her face; it was still quite warm. Without further delay, he began jerking phials of ingredients out of a knapsack he had been carrying.

"Ron, I need you to hold this for me." He handed him an open notebook on which a clearly-printed list of ingredients was written, and several notes had been scribbled in the margins. Ron glanced at it for a moment (most likely puzzling over why several pieces of lined parchment had a metal spring shot through them), then tucked it under his arm.

"What are you doing?"

"Holding it."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I meant hold it up so I can read it, git!"

"Well you should've said that, then!"

Harry bit back a scathing retort. He could quibble with Ron later, but for now he had vastly more important matters to tend. As Ron held the notebook up for Harry with a sigh, he could see how distressed he was. He wasn't sure how he'd thought Ron would react at this sort of thing, but it was strange to see him so... emotional.

The minutes stretched into nearly an hour as Harry carefully mixed ingredients, pouring them into the vessel Ron had been catching his tears in, cautiously checking and re-checking the pages of his notebook. Finally, he withdrew a long black quill with an alarmingly sharp point from his bag.

"Did you forget something in your note to Charlie?"

"No." He took out a bit of parchment, and began to write: 'Blood of this one, given joyfully, so that this one may know them once more.'

"Harry-!"

"I know," he said through gritted teeth as the shining red words he'd just written on the paper suddenly appeared, cut deep into the back of his hand. As his shaking hands folded up the parchment, a thick drop of blood fell to the floor.

"But... where'd you get one just like Umbridge's?"

"From Umbridge," he said, a humorless smile passing over him briefly as he watched the cut heal over. "She said she had loads more, and wanted me to keep it as a memento. Don't know why I didn't bin it immediately; I suppose I kept it as a sort of badge of honor... staring down evil and that rot. But I'm glad I did, now."

With that, he dropped the parchment into the goblet, withdrew his wand from his robes, and muttered "Incendio!"

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!"

He watched as the flames in the cup burned slowly, reminding him of the Triwizard Tournament that seemed as if it had taken place centuries ago, then looked up at Ron. "This is a Temporary Reanimation Draught. I needed to work fast, as it has to be brewed fresh, and you have to complete it within three hours of the... the moment it happens." He fought back a fresh wave of grief and pressed on. "If we've done it right, and I'm pretty sure we have, Hermione will be able to talk to us again."

Ron stared blankly. "What do you mean? But... but that's impossible!"

"Unfortunately, as I said, it's only temporary. If we can't do something else to bring her back properly before this draught wears off... she's gone forever."

"Harry," Ron asked hesitantly, not daring believe this, "you have that 'something else' already planned out, don't you?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. That's why I had to write to Charlie; one of the things I need is a dragon heart."

Ron's jaw dropped. "What?! You mean an ENTIRE dragon heart?! But those aren't exactly plentiful, you can't just go killing dragons to collect their hearts!"

"Hermione's not worth it?"

Ron fell silent instantly.

Without hint of a warning, Harry shouted, "Fawkes!"

Nothing happened.

"Please, Fawkes, I need you more than ever," he whispered.

After a moment, in a flash of fire, the beautiful phoenix appeared next to Harry, fluttering to his outstretched arm.

"I need a few of your tears, if you're willing," he said, indicating the goblet whose fire had just burned out moments before. Fawkes cocked his head at Harry.

"Fawkes... look." He gestured to Hermione's lifeless corpse with the cup. "I need your help."

Fawkes stared at him for what seemed like a long time. Then, he inclined his head toward the goblet, and four pearly tears fell into the mixture, turning it a translucent blue the moment they touched the surface. Harry put it down and stroked his feathers, smiling sadly.

"Thank you, Fawkes. I really owe you."

The phoenix let out a few notes of song, which made Harry feel more confident in his plan, then disappeared again in a flash.

"Give me your wand."

Ron looked at him, startled. "Wh-wha...?"

"Damn it, Ron!"

"Sorry!" He hurriedly handed it over to Harry, looking somewhat frightened.

"Your wand has a unicorn tail-hair core, right?" Harry said as he took it, not waiting for Ron's answer. "As you know, unicorn blood can preserve a human life, but it turns its drinker into a wretched thing in the process. But using anything else from a unicorn in making this draught will triple its life, without that nasty soul-killing side effect."

He pointed the wand into the goblet and began to stir. Slowly the liquid changed from blue to purple, then to pink, and finally to a glowing white. Smoke was floating on its surface.

"It's done." He handed Ron's wand back to him. "You can put down the notebook, now. And... cross your fingers."

Trembling, Ron crossed all the fingers he could manage to cross as Harry slowly bent over Hermione. He felt her face, and was panicked slightly to notice she was a great deal colder than she had been. Not wanting to waste another moment, he used the hand that was on her face to elevate her head slightly, raised the goblet to her lips, and tipped it forward.

For a moment, nothing happened as he forced the mixture down her throat. Then, a thick, pink-tinged steam began to issue from her mouth, and a moment later from her nostrils, billowing slowly upward. When all the potion was inside Hermione, he set the glass down quickly and put his now-free hand on her cheek.

"This will work, Ron," he whispered, more trying to convince himself than Ron.

"Well, your wonky schemes usually do, don't they?"

Minutes ticked by, and the newer smoke replenished the older as it dissipated. It had been nearly half an hour before anything else happened, and when it did, Harry drew back in shock.

Hermione had sat bolt upright, her unmoving body suddenly heaving with breath, her cold, somewhat surprised face suddenly wide-eyed and open-mouthed in sheer terror. She clutched a hand to her heart, then looked around the room quickly, her eyes finally finding the two of them.

"Wh... what hap... wha..." she panted, trying to regain the use of her throat. Her voice sounded a bit strange - unearthly.

Suddenly, Ron let out a little gasp and pointed at her face. Harry had to take a second look before he realized what he was supposed to be seeing.

Hermione's eyes, still wide as dinner plates, were jet black with violently red irises. Her face was a ghostly white, tinged with blue; her lips were a greatly darker shade than they had been ages ago in Charms class. A strange mark he vaguely recognized had appeared on her forehead.

"That mark is from that book!" he said, grabbing his notebook from where Ron had set it. "It's some kind of ancient rune, I drew it here in the corner of the page, see..."

Hermione suddenly snatched the book from his hands and stared at the rune in the corner. "It-" she coughed "-it means 'for the nonce'," she whispered, still trying to get her voice working properly again. "I don't... what's going on?"

Ron was shaking too badly to answer.

"Well," Harry said, scratching his head, "I suppose I've just... turned you into a zombie."

She blinked at him for a few moments, then scrambled to her feet and launched herself at the nearest mirror. A few moments passed as she examined her strange new appearance. Then she slowly turned back to Harry.

"And you... you did this?"

"Well, yeah," he said. He wasn't sure whether to grin or run for his life; those new eyes of hers were difficult to read.

Next moment, however, she had thrown her arms around him, crying into his shoulder. Only now did Harry breathe a sigh of relief - his desperate scheme had actually succeeded, and Hermione was with him again. A brief eternity passed before either could manage speech again, their hands clutching at each others backs.

"Thank you- I- you wonderful, brilliant- thank you, Harry..."

"Aw, I couldn't just let you stay dead. I wouldn't be much of a chum if I did, now, would I?"

She drew back and planted a brief kiss on his mouth as murky black tears flowed down her cheeks. His heart leapt; whether this was because of the kiss or the mere fact that she was alive to do it, he couldn't discern.

"Give... give me a phial," she croaked.

Ron blinked for a moment, evidently his welling joy having given way to bewilderment at the fact that she'd just kissed Harry, then snatched up an empty one and handed it to her. She held it up to her face and let a few of her tears fall into it.

"W-What's that for, part of the rest of it?" Ron said.

"The rest of what?" she said, stoppering the phial of dark, inky liquid. "Zombie tears are really rare. I may as well keep some as long as I've got such easy access."

Harry almost laughed as he watched Ron's struggle not to faint, but was cut off unexpectedly; Fawkes reappeared in another flash, fluttering onto Harry's shoulder.

"Fawkes!" Hermione exclaimed, beaming.

"What is it?" Harry asked, taking him from his shoulder to his arm. There was a scrap of parchment in his beak.

"Well, go on, take it!" Hermione said impatiently.

He did so, and read it. Then he gulped and looked up.

"What?"

"Dumbledore wants to see all three of us in his office." He glanced at Ron, then back at Hermione. "Now."

The three of them were just exchanging more nervous glances when a voice floated over to them from one of the toilets. "Somebody's in trouble," Myrtle sang gleefully.

i i i i

"Sit," Dumbledore whispered.

The three of them obeyed, shifting nervously in their chairs.

"Voldemort's attack on Bristol was a diversionary tactic." His voice was low, quiet, grave. "We realized this too late. The Aurors and all the magical law enforcement officers we can spare are repairing the damage as we speak. His true goal, as I suspected, was an attempt on your life."

"Sir, it was-"

"Bellatrix Lestrangle," he said, sighing as he at last turned from the window and moved slowly toward his seat. "Hagrid's already related all that he witnessed in the Forbidden Forest. But I must ask you three what possessed you to charge in there to begin with."

"We saw her," Harry said. "Well, we didn't know it was her at the time, but... but she was watching us. She's an Animagus - a hyena. I'd seen her there before - the night the other students left for Christmas break, when we ran into you - and I just wanted to find out who or what was spying on the school."

"Foolish of you," he replied, and a hint of anger played at his tones. "You should have alerted one of the teachers."

"But you all went off to fight-"

"Come now, Harry. Do you think I would leave the school completely unattended? Professors Snape, Sprout, Flitwick..."

All three of them dropped their gaze.

"You needn't worry about Bellatrix for the moment; she is long gone, our gamekeeper saw to that. Furthermore, we have taken more strenuous preventative measures - taking into account Animagi - and I can assure you that nothing of this nature will ever happen again."

He turned his gaze upon Hermione.

"Far more serious than Bellatrix's trespass on these grounds and your reckless disobedience, I'm afraid, is what you have done to Miss Granger."

Harry was quite taken aback. "Done?! I- I saved her life!"

"Have you?" Those blue eyes were again piercing him like a needle through wet paper. "Where, may I ask, did you find the instructions to make that draught?"

Harry squirmed uneasily. Dumbledore knew what he'd done, and realized that it wasn't a permanent thing. "'Arcane And Obscure Elixirs And Draughts,' sir." He could feel his friends' eyes suddenly upon him.

"I see. You are aware that the contents of that book are considered quite dangerous, and most certainly Dark?"

"Yes, sir."

"And may I ask where you acquired such unscrupulous material?"

He hesitated. Dumbledore did not rush him onward, but waited patiently. At last, Harry spoke.

"Knockturn Alley."

"Harry!" Hermione breathed.

"I didn't want to have to go through it again," he said meekly. "I've already lost so much, I- I didn't want to have to lose any more."

"So you purchased a Dark Arts book and began thumbing through it for ways to circumvent the laws of nature," Dumbledore said softly.

"Yes, sir." A few moments passed in silence before something suddenly came to him. "You were wrong."

Dumbledore's eyebrows arched slightly.

"All of you. You'd said that- that Sirius couldn't be brought back, you said once people died, they were dead and that was that. But the Draught works, and I'm sure the-

"Harry, you must listen." His tones bore a slight edge, and this more than anything quieted Harry. "Once a human being has left this coil, they are meant to stay gone. It is unwise to cheat death."

"But I can't just-

"I fear for you deeply, Harry. You have now discovered the great and terrible power of the Dark Arts, and it is not so easy to discard the promise of their hideous strength as it is to find it."

Harry stared at him with something teetering on outrage. How could Dumbledore be saying it was wrong for him to bring his friend back to life?

"I will not say I am saddened to see Miss Granger among us once again," he said, his eyes not straying from Harry's, "as that would be an outright lie. However, it is not something you should have done." He sighed. "I'm afraid I will be needing that book."

"WHAT?!"

"I cannot allow you to keep a volume with such maleficent secrets within its pages. My school is no place for such practices. I daresay that if I ever find you to have in your possession another book such as that one, I will have no choice but to expel you."

"Professor-!" Ron began.

"Or you, Mr. Weasley. Don't be so foolish as to think that just because I am directing this at Harry that the same rules do not apply to any student."

Dumbledore's gaze took on a hint of sorrow as he turned it on Hermione, whom was looking at him through her eerie new eyes as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing was actually their headmaster. His shoulders drooped ever so slightly.

"Oh, what will we do with you, now?"

To Be Continued

Chapter Thirteen: By Starlight

Whispers filled the halls as the students went down to breakfast. Everyone, regardless of which house they were in, seemed to know that Hermione Granger was now in the hospital wing. Some of them thought her to have been killed, having heard it somewhere, but most said the same thing when they heard this news: if she were dead, why did they bother taking her to Madam Pomfrey?

iiii

"You should go to bed," she told them for the thousandth time.

"No," Harry said flatly. "We're not moving from your bedside again. Ever."

The previous night, they had followed Dumbledore and Hermione to the hospital wing, where a startled Poppy Pomfrey had dropped her tray of cleaned beakers, shattering them. After Dumbledore had briefly explained the situation and left them, Harry had slipped out and retrieved his belongings from Myrtle's bathroom before anyone else could. When he stowed them in his room, he noticed the Dark book had already been taken from the bottom of his trunk, which agitated him; it seemed Dumbledore had now lost faith in his supposed Golden Boy.

"I'm so sorry." Hermione's haunting eyes were shining. "I've gotten you in so much trouble, now, Harry..."

"It's not his fault Dumbledore thinks he's the next You-Know-Who," Ron said scathingly. "I can't believe him!"

"He has good reason," Hermione whispered. "Oh, Harry, why ever did you make that awful potion?"

"The answer's right in front of me," he responded quietly.

He saw she had been about to continue, but at this simple statement, she faltered, and stroked his hand even more fervently than she had been. "I- I-"

"I know, I know, I shouldn't be dabbling in the Dark Arts, as it's not a nice thing to do, and nothing good could possibly come from it, and I'll end up killing off everything that crosses my path. The Boy Who Snuffed It will become The Boy Who Snuffs, and so on and so forth."

"Harry... I'm not worth you turning evil."

He blinked, and saw that the murky liquid that had been forming was now rolling down her cheeks.

"Of course you are," he soothed. "And I'm not turning evil, I don't care what Dumbledore said. I just... I couldn't lose you. I couldn't."

For a long time, she stared at him, unsure of what to say. Then a hand strayed to her robes, and she produced the necklace. To Harry's surprise, the crystal was now red.

"What's that thing?" Ron asked.

"Why's it changed colour?" Harry asked.

"Obvious, isn't it?" she said, holding it up next to her face.

"Oh." Harry pulled his own out, which was still the same shade of green, of course.

"Wait, don't I get one?" Ron said. Harry stifled a smile.

"I'm almost afraid of what will happen, but..." She bit her lip for a second. "Let's touch them together again."

They did so, but her fears were well-founded. While a great deal brighter, they kept glowing the same hues they had been, though at the exact point at which they met, the two colours combined into a strange, silvery-grey borderline.

"But of course," she sighed. "How stupid of me to have hoped otherwise."

"What?"

"These crystals are imbued with magic, as you probably guessed. Once they've taken owners, only the two people that own them can make them shine purest white. Which means..."

"What, what?!"

"It means the crystal can tell I'm not the same person that bought it. I'm not really Hermione anymore, because I'm... I'm dead."

"But of course you are!" Ron insisted.

"The Soul Gems don't lie!" She was utterly distraught. "I may still have her body, and I may still have her spirit and memories, but I'm not really Hermione! I'm just... I'm just a cheap imitation!"

"But they glowed brighter," Harry said. "They must realize that even though something's not quite right, it's not all wrong, either."

"That's because I'm... Pseudo-Hermione!"

Harry snorted. "Pseudo-Hermione, eh?"

But her lip was trembling, and she seemed hurt that he wasn't taking her seriously.

"Look," he said, placing his hand on her knee. "You might be the walking dead, but you're still our Hermione. Everything about you says it, from the way you hold yourself to how sharp your mind is working. I certainly don't think you're a fake, and I'm sure Ron doesn't, either."

Ron shook his head vigorously. "You might look a bit peaky, but still the same old 'Mione, no doubt about it."

She looked between the two of them, then sighed deeply. "But for how much longer? How long is this rubbish potion supposed to keep me alive- or undead, or whatever?"

Harry did not answer, and did not look at her.

"Harry?"

He coughed. "Maybe a few weeks. Probably not that long."

The moment she began weeping, Harry pressed on. "That's only because we're not out of the woods. Harry Potter has not yet begun to fight."

"What are you on about?" she moaned immediately.

"Is this the thing you wanted the dragon heart for?" Ron asked nervously.

"The WHAT?!" Hermione's eyes had flown open, a move that was much more disquieting when they were black as coal. "Why on earth do you need one of those?!"

"Another of my mad potions," he whispered. "A good one."

"But Harry, we can't do anymore Dark magic, it'll-"

"This potion may have come from a Dark book, but it's anything but. In fact, it's one of the purest potions I've ever read about."

"What, what is it?" Hermione and Ron said in unison. Harry grinned cunningly, shooting a particularly meaningful look at Hermione.

"The Elixir of Agapé."

i i i i i

Dear Moony,

I need some things, and please don't ask why, just send them on if you can. I promise you it's of the utmost importance, and if you can manage getting them to me, I swear I'll never ask you for another thing as long as I live. I need seven white dove feathers and two silver-and-gold wedding bands; if you need money for them, help

yourself to my Gringotts vault. I would be forever in your debt. Please send them on as soon as humanly possible!

Harry

i i i i

"He's the only one I can trust, now," Harry muttered.

"But he's still working for the Order," Hermione whispered. "What if he alerts Dumbledore to what we're planning?"

Just then, the doors creaked open, and Ron slipped in, running over to them.

"Got it," he muttered.

"Did you ask Neville, or just go and take it?" Hermione needled him.

"I asked Neville. He had one."

"Let's see it," Harry said.

A tiny seed was in the middle of his palm.

"Forget-me-not, right?"

"I'm not that thick," Ron protested. "Of course it's a forget-me-not!"

"Good, good, then just, give it here, I've got my bag."

Ron handed it over, and Harry took out a thick parchment envelope, dropping the seed in. He sealed it before shoving it back in the bag.

"Only need to open it one more time," he muttered.

"Oh, yes," Hermione whispered, her hand darting under her pillow. "Quick, put this in there, too."

She handed Harry a jar, which he held up to his eyes. "What is it?"

"The Mandrake Draught, of course! I nicked it from Madam Pomfrey's cabinet last night - it's what's left of the harvest in our second year. I'd feel a bit guilty about it, but I doubt there'll be many petrified students cropping up again."

Between their classes and mounting studies (they only bothered with it to keep up appearances), the leisure time of their last few days had been spent frantically hunting down all the ingredients for the Elixir. The easiest of these was plain white rice, which Dobby was more than happy to provide them with. The hardest was still hanging on Pigwidgeon's return.

Hedwig returned first, however. At breakfast on the fifth day after Hermione's death-and-resurrection, she had swooped into the Great Hall, bearing a rather flat package. He petted her gratefully and slipped it into his pocket while she helped herself to one of his sausage links.

Back in the dormitory, he frantically ripped the paper off to find a box. Opening the lid, he found seven gleaming white feathers, all in pristine condition, and under that, lying on the velvet-lined bottom, were a pair of extremely handsome rings: two thin bands of silver tightly intertwining one gold band.

"There's a letter Spellotaped to the inside of the lid," Ron said.

Harry laid the rings aside and opened it hurriedly.
Dear Harry,

I can't imagine what you'd want with wedding bands, but I do hope you're behaving yourself! You've not been sneaking girls up to your dormitory, have you? I pray an owl bearing a birth announcement doesn't arrive next! Of course, that still doesn't explain your need for the feathers. Either way, I'm glad to have helped, and you can certainly count on me for anything else you may need.

Moony

"Lupin's a stand-up chap, isn't he?" Ron said, grinning. Harry's mouth was also stretched into a wide smile as he bent to further examine the artifacts.

iiii

One small event interrupted their otherwise smooth plotting. Colin Creevey, a student having stepped on him in the halls, had turned up in the hospital wing with a broken toe. Immediately upon seeing Hermione, he started taking pictures, and though Hermione and Ron seemed ready to tear him a new one, Harry said that they would actually pose for his camera - IF they got every last photograph, and had his assurance that none would find their way into anyone else's hands. Colin hastily agreed, and several semi-poignant snapshots were taken... though Hermione adamantly refused to smile.

Pigwidgeon didn't deliver his letter until Friday, two days later, having had a lot further to travel. The normally-hyper owl was positively exhausted, and gave one tired hoot before heading for the owlery.

"Well, he obviously hasn't sent the heart on," Ron mumbled, looking at the envelope. Harry, also uneasy, opened it.
Harry,

What you are asking of me is impossible. I'm sorry, I would really love to help, but I just can't see any way of doing it; all of our dragons are quite precious to us. It pains me to tell you this, and I'm deeply sorry to hear that Hermione's sick. I hope Madam Pomfrey will find some other means of curing her.

Charlie

"Git," Ron snapped. "I'd like to see her come up with something better than what we've got."

"This isn't over," Harry whispered, glancing warily over at Ginny, who had looked up at Ron's harsh outburst. "We'll make him understand, we'll make him try harder."

"And just how are we gonna do that? Send him a Howler?"

His face was set. "We'll do one better. We're going to Romania."

iiii

Harry and Ron were quite startled to find Ginny and Neville in the common room when they went downstairs late that night.

"What-?"

"You're not going off alone," Ginny said, hands on her hips.

"But we're not going anywhere!" Ron lied. It was a feeble one, at that; he had his Cleansweep slung over his shoulder, and Harry had his Firebolt. They were both wearing heavy traveling cloaks.

"Do we look that thick?" Neville said, glaring. "You two have been acting weird all week. We know it's got something to do with Hermione."

Ginny held up a handful of peach-tinted string. Harry and Ron exchanged a dark glance. Just how much had they overheard?

"What's all this plotting about?" Ginny pleaded. "You can trust us, can't you?"

"We don't want you getting chucked out, too," Ron said.

"TELL US!!!" they both shouted.

"Shh!" Ron hissed. "D'you-"

"The game's up, Ron," Harry breathed resignedly, walking across the dark common room and flopping into a chair. If they kept shouting at each other, the whole castle would wake up, and then they'd really be in it; seemed a wiser move to let the cat out now and avoid piercing glares and accusations. "Hermione is dying."

"WHAT?!" they hissed, barely able to keep from hollering again.

"Well, really, she's already dead," Ron said, clutching his broom uneasily. "Except... not. It's a bit hard to explain..."

"What are you babbling about?!" Ginny hissed. "This isn't funny!"

"No, it isn't," Harry muttered.

"Then why are you saying such horrible things?!"

"Because it's the truth. If we don't get hold of a, er... special item soon - and by soon, I mean less than a week - Hermione's not going to make it."

Neville and Ginny's faces fell, and they sat down silently, staring off into space. Ron and Harry exchanged depressed looks.

"We're going with you," Neville whispered.

"We told you, we don't want-"

"You haven't got a choice," Ginny continued. "If you don't let us go, we'll just follow you, anyway. Hermione's our friend, too, and we're not going to let her die if there's anything we can do to prevent it."

Harry sighed, pulling at his hair. He knew this speech - it had been given almost exactly a year ago, by the exact same people. He also knew it was futile to try and put them off their determined course.

"Fine, forget I said anything. Let's just be off, we don't have time to spare."

iiii

The Hogwarts grounds seemed as dark as ever they had as Harry, Ron, Ginny, Neville, and a reluctant Hermione stepped outside. The half-moon kept drifting behind the sparse clouds, and the stars seemed far dimmer than usual.

"I still don't think I should go," Hermione whispered. "I ought to just stay in bed, what if I'm dangerous, or-"

"Bollocks," Harry breathed as he eased the giant oaken doors closed. "You're as dangerous as Fang."

She smiled, but definitely still held her misgivings.

"Now, how the bloody hell are we all going to manage with only three brooms?" Ron whispered. Ginny had retrieved hers from her room before they set off - she and Neville had also donned warmer garments.

"Well, we'll just have to double up," Harry said. "Hermione can ride on mine, and I guess Neville can ride with-"

"Look!" Hermione shrieked. Harry grimaced at how careless she was being with her volume, then saw what she meant.

Luna Lovegood was riding casually across the grounds toward them, perched atop a thestral. Its skeletal, dragon-like head bobbed up and down as it gamboled, ghostly eyes staring forward, and the sparse black hairs covering it did nothing to conceal the bones underneath. Its huge, leathery wings were folded to its sides.

"Good evening," she said pleasantly. "Out for a midnight fly, I see. So am I." She patted the head of the horse-like creature, and it tossed its mane. Ginny was the only one who looked unnerved; to her eyes, Luna was floating in midair, petting nothing.

"Horrid-looking things." Ron looked as if he'd just been handed a jar of Stinksap and told it was the only thing he could drink for a year. "I'd almost rather they were still invisible."

"I- I can see them, now," Hermione whispered. "It's because... because I'm dead, isn't it?"

Neville and Ginny spun to look at her at once, their reactions rivaling the one they'd had upon seeing her ghastly appearance several minutes ago. Luna, more slowly, also looked at her.

"DEAD?!" Ginny hissed. "But you just said she was going to die, not that she's already there! How can she be up and about if she's deceased?!"

"She's undead," Ron whispered. "I tried to say as much earlier..."

Neville sputtered. "Wait, you- you mean she's a-"

"Zombie," Harry finished.

"Wow," Luna breathed. "I don't believe I've ever met a zombie before..."

Harry noticed at that moment that Hermione was on the verge of a breakdown. It dawned on him how horrible it would be to have people standing around talking about your untimely demise like that.

"Let's just get on with it, alright?" he said hastily.

"This may just be the ticket," Neville whispered. "I mean, instead of doubling up on the brooms, the rest of us can just take thestrals! I mean, we can all see them, now!"

"I can't!" Ginny wailed.

"That's not half bad, Neville," Harry said. "Luna, can you call two more thestrals for us?"

"Of course," she said, and she began making a sort of clicking noise with her mouth. Harry was not quite sure how to describe it, but it sounded kind of wet and ghastly. After a minute or two, however, a thestral emerged from the edge of the Forbidden Forest, another one closely thereafter.

"Good work, thanks, Luna!" She beamed at him, then turned to watch as the two beasts trotted lazily toward them. Luna sped this process up considerably by holding out a raw steak, which the light breeze carried to their nostrils. They quickly moved in on it, and when they reached her began licking the blood from the meat.

"Alright, let's get this over with, as I'm sure the moment everybody wakes up they'll send out a search party." Harry was already astride his broom. "Well, saddle up, Neville. You, too, Hermione."

As nervous as he could tell she was, he knew she didn't hold any mistrust in these creatures. The thestrals had served them well last year, and were about to do so tonight.

"Neville, you're going to take point. Ron can tell your thestral where it's going, he's been there before. After that, he can take up the rear. Hermione's going to stay in the center, right on Neville's heels. Ginny and I can be the wingmen - er, wingpersons." He vaguely realized he sounded like Mad-Eye, which made him appreciate the methods in the old Auror's madness.

"What about me?" Luna asked.

Harry blinked. "Eh?"

"I'm going along, too, aren't I? Only I provided half your transportation, and it's not fair to make me stay behind."

They sighed collectively, and Harry spoke. "Oh, all right, but this is the limit - I swear, if Dean or somebody comes pelting out of the forest on a flying carpet, I'm going to Stun him. Six is more than enough. You can fly above us and scout, I guess."

Harry passed out five pairs of goggles, as he knew it would be a long, rough trip, and the biting wind would surely close their eyes eventually. Ginny used her wand to duplicate her pair, and tossed the newly-conjured one to Luna. As the uneasy sextet prepared for liftoff, Hermione stopped them.

"This is a little something that might just keep us from getting reamed upon our return." She withdrew her wand, swept it in a wide circle, and said, "Acceleratus!"

Nothing. They all blinked, waiting for something spectacular, but all that happened was a quiet snort from one of the thestrals.

"I told you," she whispered. "The Gem doesn't know me anymore, and neither does my wand. I'm the world's biggest fib."

Harry stepped from his broom and went over to her, patting her forearm.

"It'll be okay, Hermione. We'll bring you back and everything'll be fine. Don't worry so much. But what was that spell you were trying to do?"

"Acceleratus Charm. It's supposed to make moving objects double their speed. I thought... maybe we could cut our flight time in half."

"Let me have a go with it, then." Harry withdrew his own wand and repeated her gesture and incantation. A feeble golden dust settled over them, making their cloaks and mounts sparkle dully.

"Er... did I do it right?"

"Well, it's not as bright as it should be, but yes, I'm sure we'll be getting some manner of speed boost now. At least, for a few hours, anyway." She still looked quite put out about her wand as she stowed it, and Harry found his heart had sunken slightly out of empathy.

"Here," Harry said, handing her one of the rings.

"What's this for?"

"It's one of the ingredients."

"I know that, you showed me the list," she said impatiently. "I mean... why are you handing it to me?"

"To remind you of why we're doing all this." His voice was quiet and soothing - so much that only she could hear it. "To remind you of why I'm doing this. You hang onto that ring for the time being, and every time you look at it, I want you to remember that I would do anything for you... lie, cheat, steal... keep a secret... even fly to Romania to prise open a dragon's chest cavity. You are more than worth this, Hermione. I don't want you to ever think otherwise."

She smiled blearily, onyx eyes shining with gratitude, and slipped the ring onto her pale finger. The silver and maize hues shimmered elegantly in the starlight.

"Thank you," she whispered as she slipped her arms carefully around her thestral's neck.

"Of course." As his hand went to his pocket, he felt the band's mate, and unconsciously threaded his finger through it.

"Whoa, WHOA!"

"Neville!"

His thestral was beginning to trot back toward the forest, evidently bored with all the idle chatter.

"Ron, get on with it!"

"Oh, right!" Ron jumped off his broom and sprinted toward the ghastly creature.

"Ready, now," he told the others as he hurriedly remounted his Firebolt.

Ron spoke loudly and clearly, as if worrying the beast was deaf. "Thirteen Fifteen, Trebuchet Lane! Er... in Romania!"

And the twinkling adventurers were soaring through the night sky.

To Be Continued

Chapter Fourteen: The Clemency of Tempestia

"Thank Merlin!"

Neville's thestral had suddenly plummeted toward the ground, and Hermione and Luna's steeds followed. Harry, Ron and Ginny immediately tilted their brooms downward, staying as close as possible (Harry's broom being the fastest, he was the only one that quite managed this). As the beasts lightly touched down, Harry pulled the nose of his broom up and halted just above the ground, deftly dismounting. Ginny landed similarly, but Ron fell off just as he leveled out over the grass.

"Shite," he muttered, standing and brushing off the knees of his trousers. "Been flying too long, thought we'd never get here."

"Goggles off!" Ginny said cheerily. They painfully peeled the eyewear from around their heads - the high-velocity journey had, in fact, nearly blown them through their faces.

Neville's eyes widened as soon as he'd blinked a few times. "Whoa..."

Thirteen Fifteen, Trebuchet Lane was not a warm, quaint stable as Harry had surmised, but what appeared to have once been a medieval fortress. The battlements were certainly situated for optimum defence, and it had obviously once sported a drawbridge. In recent centuries, this had been replaced by hinged doors, and a stone bridge permanently connected it to the knoll they had landed on. In the crushing darkness, it looked very foreboding.

"Do we just... knock?" Ron asked hesitantly. "I mean, we traveled by Floo powder last time."

Harry kicked at the grass. "If only we'd had some Floo powder, we wouldn't have had to fly all this way. I didn't fancy stealing some from Dumbledore's office, though... not while he's in it, at any rate."

"This was stupid," Hermione wailed. "You've all risked expulsion so I can keep breathing longer! I'll never be able to pay you back for this, and-"

"Hermione," Harry said pointedly, wagging a hand. She glanced at her own, then sighed.

"Oh, all right, then. Let's just get on with it before-"

All fell silent instantly, and a quick glance around told Harry that the reason was the same for each.

"Was that a... yelp?" Neville ventured.

"Some kind of animal or another," Ginny breathed.

"I think Hermione's right." Harry warily eyed the nearby forest, clutching his Firebolt tightly. "Let's try and get inside."

They left the thestrals to graze on the knoll (trusting they could defend themselves against any dangers that may turn up) as three of them shouldered broomsticks. Taking a deep breath, Harry led them over the bridge and to the doors. When they reached them, however, they swung open welcomingly of their own accord, and the travelers cautiously walked through.

They were in an extremely large foyer with a high ceiling, decorated with all sorts of tapestries and statues. One of such statues, an enormous Norwegian Ridgeback, stood proudly in the centre, poised as if roaring to the heavens. Crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling, though Harry noticed quite a few of them were missing.

No sooner had they passed the imposing statue halfway across the hall when who should come rushing out of one of the doors on their right but Charlie Weasley, short red hair looking extremely unruly, his robes half-on.

"Charlie!" Ron and Ginny shouted. He skidded to a halt, then turned in their direction. When his tired-looking eyes had finally focused on them, he nearly fell backward into a suit of armour.

"Wha- Ginny, Ron!" he exclaimed, clutching his chest. "What in blazes are you two doing HERE?!"

They grinned, running over to their bewildered brother and embracing him. The other four stood back, watching how delighted the three looked (after Charlie had calmed down a touch). Eventually they released, and Charlie looked around at all of them, a weak, confused smile on his broad, kind face.

"But... but what's going on? What are you all doing here, and who - wait, aren't you the Lovegood's little girl?!"

Luna smiled, nodding. Harry had completely forgotten that The Burrow was not that far from the Lovegood homestead.

"How did you get here? Well, I can see a few brooms, but... but you couldn't have FLOWN all that way!"

"We did," Ginny said gleefully. "Though some of us were on thestrals."

"Thestrals, even!" He looked as if he wanted to laugh, but was too shocked to manage it properly. "So why- Merlin..."

He had finally taken a good look at Hermione, and his face had slackened.

"What on earth...?"

"I'm a zombie," she said promptly, as if wanting to stop her friends from pussyfooting around the subject for hours on end.

"So this... will be about the dragon heart," he said slowly, his eyes still fixed on Hermione.

"That's right," Ron said, somewhat heatedly. "We've come to change your mind about getting us one, as you don't seem to understand-"

"Save your breath, dear brother," Charlie said, and at last he looked to have calmed down, a triumphant smile spreading over his features. "I daresay Hermione will have her heart soon enough."

"Really?!" five of them chorused; Luna said "That's nice!"

"Actually, I've just been told by- ah, Diluvius!"

A wizened old wizard had just appeared in the doorway, leaning heavily on a walking stick, calmly surveying the cause of such racket. He was wearing a nightgown of deepest violet, and his rather lengthy beard was thrown over his shoulder.

"What have we here, Weasley?" he asked kindly. "Visitors?"

"Diluvius Abernathy, I'd like you to meet my brother, Ronald, and sister, Ginerva." The two of them winced at the use of their full names, especially Ginny. Charlie, taking no notice of this, began motioning to the others. "These are their friends, Hermione Granger-" and the old man peered at her, fascinated, "-Luna Lovegood - it was Luna, wasn't it? - Harry Potter, and-"

"What's that?" the old wizard said, eyes suddenly wide behind his thick spectacles. "Forgive an old man, but I distinctly heard you say 'Harry Potter'."

"I did, sir," he said, beaming. The old wizard surveyed Harry over his pointed nose with mingled apprehension and respect. He, of course, performed the usual check of the hairline.

"So this is young Potter," he said at last. "To finally meet you is something of an honour, now, isn't it?" He offered his hand, and Harry shook it hesitantly. "And who is this other lad?"

"I'm N-Neville," he said nervously. "Neville Longbottom."

The elderly wizard nodded. "Ah, yes, Longbottom. I knew your grandmother. Yes, those were good days, good days, indeed." He stared off into space for a few moments, absorbed in his own memories, then ambled back over to Charlie. "Well, I've let you know what I set out to, and I'll just be going back to my chambers. It was nice meeting you, children," he called over his shoulder. "Good eve!"

"Good eve," they chorused, all of them a bit disgruntled at having just been called "children".

"Well, anyway," Charlie began brightly, "Diluvius has just informed me that one of our older dragons is fading fast. This isn't exactly happy news, but my superiors had consented to donate the heart if any were to pass on in the near future. It's not something that happens often - perhaps that's why they actually agreed to it - but I figured I could at least do that much..."

"Thanks loads, Charlie!" Ron said, grinning. Harry grinned as well, but he noticed Hermione was close to tears.

"What's the matter?" he whispered.

"You... all of you... so kind... for m-me..."

Charlie shrugged. "Can't have the brightest witch of her age dying on us, now, can we?"

i i i i

"Just down here," Charlie whispered, motioning them onward.

The cavern would have been pitch black if not for the torches hanging in brackets along the walls. The ceiling was higher still than the entryway of the fortress, and the stalactites seemed quite threatening.

"How much farth-"

"Ron!" Hermione hissed. "Charlie's just said it's not much farther!"

"Sorry, but we've been down here for ages," he replied. "I'm starting to get the willies."

Ginny snickered at the word "willies".

"This is it," Charlie said, stopping suddenly. Harry had to backpedal to keep from running into him. "She's just around this corner. Everyone, stay quiet, and we may be able to get close enough for a good look

without waking her." He looked around at them. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yes," Hermione said without hesitation. "I want to see the creature that will be helping me come back to life. To sort've... pay my respects."

He nodded. "Come on, then."

They slowly crept forward into an extremely large chamber. Moonlight filtered through a large growth of amethyst blocking a wide hole in the ceiling, casting a violet-tinted glow throughout the room. At the far end from the mouth, on a sort of dias, rested a dragon.

"A Hungarian Horntail," Harry breathed.

"I see you haven't forgotten your last encounter with one of these," Charlie muttered, grinning.

The lizardlike Horntail's gleaming black scales had taken on a duller sheen with age, and the rise and fall of her sides seemed troubled. The bronze spikes anchored to her head and tail appeared tarnished and cracked, and there were scars all over her body and wings. Charlie raised his lit wandtip higher so they could have a better look.

"How beautiful," Luna breathed.

"How awful," Ron croaked. "Poor old thing."

"This girl's been with us for quite some time," Charlie said in hushed tones. "We call her Old Horny - bit of a joke, there, she's never been much for reproduction. Come to think of it, we've never got so much as a single egg from her, but we-"

"Oop-!"

Neville, who was backing away from the grandiose creature nervously, had slipped on a pebble, and his arms were whirling to prevent himself from falling. Harry and Ginny, who were closest to him, grabbed his arms, but all this accomplished was sending three of

them to the floor instead of one. The thudding noise echoed throughout the chamber.

"Now you've done it," Charlie breathed.

As they scrambled to their feet, a deafening roar sounded, resonating in their bones and sending their hearts into overdrive. Before they could consider any course of action, a giant plume of fire erupted from the creature's mouth - thankfully pointed in the general direction of the ceiling. The cluster of amethyst glowed red before resuming its natural colour. Hermione gave a little gasp, and her hands went to her mouth.

As the weathered dragon raised her great head, he saw both Ginny and Ron edge in front of Hermione. Luna, Neville and Charlie made nervous motions, but Harry stepped forward, shaking like a wind-tossed flag.

"What manner of beast disturbs my final moments?"

Speech failed him. Had this dragon not only spoken to him, but actually asked for his name? He looked behind him, to see if any of his companions thought this as strange as he did, but they all looked as terrified as they had before.

"Answer, human!" she hissed.

Harry gulped, then stammered, "Harry P-Potter. I've come for your heart."

The instant he began speaking, the room went deathly silent. He could feel the eyes of his friends boring into his back, and could see the mildly-bemused glint in one of the dragon's enormous orbs.

"Parseltongue. I have not heard that cross a human's lips in quite some time."

Harry stared, awestruck, at the sight before him. The greying scales of the magnificent creature moved with such weight and strain that he almost felt older just looking at them. As he watched, her head

drooped slightly, then raised again, a piercing gaze in those half-blind, catlike slits.

"My heart, to restore the life of a friend."

He started, glancing back at Hermione briefly, then responded. "Yes, but how-?"

"Sight may have abandoned Tempestia, but the scents are as strong as ever." Her nostrils flared as she breathed deeply through them, her milky, yellow orbs closed. "The stench of decay; much too pungent to be anything alive, but not so strong as a rotting corpse. The living dead."

"Exactly," he responded, taken aback at how casual she was about this. "But... but how did you know that's why I want-?"

"Harry Puh Potter," she said, adding his stutter into his name, "I have lived far longer than a dragon ought to. I have seen hearts taken from my brethren, and at first I was confused and angered by this. Eventually, my curiosity gripped me so tightly that I stalked one of such heart thieves, and saw what use they made of it. A nobler purpose I could not have imagined... to restore a life."

He did not know what to say to this. Sadness dominated her features, yet she was so accepting of her fate - almost eager.

"Please, Tempestia," he said nervously. "I don't think I can take it from such a virtuous and majestic Horntail such as yourself."

Was that a smile? "We can do without the flattery." A rustle of her leathery wings. "I daresay you'll find more use for it than I. This old one has reached the end of her days, and the life will ebb from these scales within the night. Perhaps I will rest easier knowing that which moved my blood these many centuries will move that of another once more."

"Th-thank you," he said, bowing hesitantly. "Your generosity is boundless." When he raised his head again, he saw she was, in fact,

smiling pleasantly, her front legs supporting her weakly and a contented expression on her seasoned face.

"She's in such agony," he said, this time in English to those behind him, "...and she knows she hasn't got much time. It's hard to watch..."

Suddenly, he felt something brush his sleeve, and saw Charlie stepping forward, his wand held at his side.

"What're you-?"

"I'm going to move it from her chest into this enchanted jar," he said softly, gesturing vaguely at a jar on the floor that Harry was almost sure hadn't been there before. "The heart will be a bit fresher if taken while she's living, and... well, Old Horny's misery will be over at last."

"Tempestia," he corrected. "Er, will it be... messy?"

"No, not at all."

"Painful?"

Charlie looked at him quizzically. "Just what did the two of you talk about?"

Harry shook his head. "Just, be quick about it, please. She shouldn't suffer."

For a long moment, everyone looked at Harry, occasionally glancing at the dragon silently waiting for her doom. At last, Charlie raised his wand.

"Farewell, Harry Puh Potter," she hissed warmly.

"Thank you," Harry said. "I will never forget this."

And as Charlie muttered an incantation under his breath, the Horntail's chest began to glow a dull turquoise. The light went through blue to violet, and when it became a dark red, something began to emerge.

It was one of the strangest things Harry had ever seen, a heart floating out of someone's chest - and he had seen a great many strange things. Tempestia's face showed signs of slight discomfort, but still looked quite serene. Then, at the moment when Charlie levitated the lid onto the jar, the dragon slumped forward, still smiling, and breathed no more.

iiii

The scene was quite sober in the sitting room at Thirteen Fifteen, Trebuchet Lane. Seven young wizards and witches were seated around a table, staring at a rather large jar containing an equally-large heart, sitting in a shallow pool of blood.

"I'm not worthy of such sacrifice," Hermione finally breathed, breaking the silence.

"Don't fret over it," Ron said. "That dragon was old, she probably wouldn't have lasted much longer. She seemed ready for it, really."

"She was," Harry said quietly. "Tempestia knew why we needed it, and thought it a noble purpose. She also seemed to think she was going to die tonight, anyway."

"I still think it's barking that you can talk to dragons," Neville said. "I mean, first snakes..."

"Maybe she picked Parseltongue up from a snake at some point," Luna mused. "She was quite elderly."

"Well, dragons are reptiles, too, aren't they?" Hermione suggested. "It's more logical than, say, Crookshanks talking to him."

Harry smiled weakly. "If your cat starts striking up conversations with me, I'm going on holiday to Antarctica and never coming back." He sighed, placing his face in his hands. Through his fingers, he saw Hermione was massaging her temples.

For some reason, Charlie thought this was quite strange, and was looking between the two of them, a disbelieving look playing at his eyes.

"Good lord," he breathed. "I never would've thought."

"What?" Ron asked.

"The two of you! Getting married!"

"Two of who?" Ginny asked, startled.

"Harry and Hermione, of course!"

The two mentioned sat bolt upright in their chairs.

"What the bloody hell are you on about?!" Harry half-shouted.

"The rings, you prat!"

"Wha...?" Harry blinked several times, then glanced at Hermione for support. However, she was now looking at him in an amused-yet-touched fashion.

"Oh, Harry... you're wearing the other one..."

He glanced at his hands, and found it was the truth; there was the other wedding band on his right ringfinger, glinting in the light from the lamps.

"Blimey, I didn't realize I had it on..."

"Well, this is good news!" Charlie exclaimed, beaming. "Wait until I tell mum, she'll positively burst!"

Harry was beside himself. "Charlie, it's- it's not what you-"

"You sly bastard," Neville said, elbowing him in the ribs. "And you told us that all that hand-holding and kissing was just to shut the school up!"

As his jaw hung open, he looked around at everyone. Neville was still flashing him that knowing smile, Ginny was about to fall out of her chair with giggles, Luna was grinning from ear to ear (undoubtedly at the prospect of attending a nude airplane wedding after all), Charlie's fists were on his hips as he surveyed them proudly, and Ron looked as if he'd just been told he was related to kneazles.

Hermione, whom he'd expected to be just as horrified as he was, was giggling, too, but she was also looking at him quite fondly. Frustration and bewilderment dominated his thoughts. Why do these things keep happening to him?

"It's sweet," she whispered. "I didn't know you'd be wearing the other one... but you must see how it looks..."

After a few moments, realization kicked in, and he saw what she meant. Here they had been snogging showily in the halls for quite some time, holding hands and wearing gaudy friendship bracelets, and suddenly they turn up wearing matching rings. Harry began laughing harder than he had done in what seemed like a millennium; as hard as he had when he and Hermione had sorted out that morning in the common room and had shaken hands.

Eventually, due to how loudly he and Hermione were chortling, the rest of them started wondering what the joke was, so Harry told them. Ron, of course, knew the rings were ingredients for the Elixir, and backed them up, which served to convince the others that they weren't just presenting them with another great cover-up. A fresh wave of the giggles hit Hermione upon the completion of the explanation, and they found it to be quite contagious; it was nearly an hour before the laughter died out completely, and after Charlie retired to his chambers, the sextet drifted off toward the spare bedroom, quite exhausted.

iiiiii

Harry sat bolt upright in bed. Another vision had graced his subconscious, one that his scar was conducting so strongly that he felt like his head would combust from the sheer pain. His hand

clapped tightly over it, teeth gritted against the agony, he looked around the room, noticing Hermione wasn't in her bed.

Grabbing his glasses from the nightstand, he slipped back into his shoes, threw his Hogwarts robes over his other clothes, and was about to head for the door when he saw a silhouette at the window.

Hermione was standing there, gazing out at the twinkling sky. Her hands were clasped in front of her, but he could not see her face. Harry hesitated, then crept over to her, careful not to wake his sleeping comrades. When he was two feet from her, she turned and jumped.

"Oh, Harry-! It- I didn't hear you-"

"Shh," he whispered, pointing to the beds. "What are you doing?"

She glanced around at the beds more carefully than he had done, and he heard Neville's snoring falter. Then she pressed a finger to her azure lips, grabbed her travelling cloak and tiptoed toward the door, Harry following close behind.

The first hint of false dawn was playing at the horizon as they emerged into the night air, clutching at their cloaks. When the doors had closed, Hermione had begun walking slowly over the bridge, and Harry caught up with her.

"I don't sleep," she said simply.

"Nightmares?"

"No, I mean I don't sleep. At all. Ever since you revived me, I just... haven't needed to."

"That's right," he breathed. "I remember seeing that when I skimmed over some of the Draught's side effects. But... but you slept in the hospital wing..."

"I pretended to," she said, smiling. "I wanted you and Ron to get a few winks in, and you didn't seem to want to as long as I was awake,

so... I acted like I nodded off, just so you wouldn't feel obligated to stay up with me."

"You didn't have to-"

"Would you have slept otherwise?"

Hesitation. "Well... no, probably not."

"Then I did have to. No sense in you two going without rest for the dead girl with a penis." The smile she had been wearing fell slightly. "What's woken you, though?"

"A rather unimportant vision."

"Harry-"

"All I got was anger. This intense, gripping surge of pure hatred. I don't need to be- well, you, to put that one together."

Despite how pale and blue-tinted she was, he thought he could see her blush. "You mean he's not happy that you've managed to escape his wrath yet again."

"On the conk," he said. "I'm almost positive I could feel him thinking about me through the loathing. That's probably why it burned so badly." His eyes began to flare as his jaw set, his scar twinging again. "I have to say the feeling's mutual. If that bitch Bellatrix ever comes near you again-"

"Oh, Harry!" she exclaimed, suddenly peering intently at him. "How bad is it?!"

He realized his hand had returned to his forehead and immediately let go, though it still ached. "Nothing, it's- don't worry over it..."

"Are you sure? I mean, for it to still be hurting, even now-"

"I'm fine," he lied nervously. Her eyes were less than a centimeter from the scar now, her hands on his shoulders, and it seemed to him

that his space was being seriously encroached upon. He could feel her hot breath on his nose, and his lips touched her chin.

She seemed to notice this, too, for she dropped back from her toes, becoming nominally shorter than him once again and looking shyly at her shoelaces. "S-sorry," she muttered.

He relaxed, smiling again. "For what, caring too much?"

"That's how we keep ending in trouble," she said, her disquieting black-and-red eyes looking up into his. "I keep doing stupid things in the name of your well-being, or my own selfish desires. I need to start putting my brain to work when it comes to you, as I haven't been doing much of it lately."

Harry sighed, placing a hand on her shoulder. "I said don't worry over it. Maybe you have been a little reckless lately, but... if you weren't, I'd be the one dead, and I know you would never look through a Dark book, which was reckless of me, as well, so... well, things sort've worked out, didn't they?"

Her lips slowly formed a smile, and she coughed. "Well, you should go back inside and get some sleep. I'll just stay out here until you all wake up."

"No, I'll stay with you. I don't feel like going back to bed just yet, anyway," he added quietly.

"But you really should get some sleep, it'll be morning soon-"

"It is morning. Look."

Indeed, the sun was now peeking over the horizon, its brilliant rays stretching wide across the landscape.

"Well... you still need to rest, we have a long fly ahead of us tonight..."

"I can take a nap after the others wake up to keep you company. Until then, you're stuck with me."

A comfortable silence settled over them as they sat down to watch the Romanian sunrise, their backs against the crumbling railing of the stone bridge. Something began playing at the back of Harry's mind. It wasn't something he thought he should ask, but his curiosity got the better of him.

"Hermione?"

"Yes?"

He cleared his throat nervously. "Er... I've been kind of wondering..."

"C'mon, out with it."

"What's it like?"

A knit of the eyebrows. "Sorry?"

"You know... to... die."

There was a pause so saturated with discomfort that Harry was sure he could have touched it.

"You've heard all those rubbish stories about heading toward a light."

"Of course."

"Well... they're true. Except... they all say how wonderful it is, and how nice it feels. How you feel like you're going to be fine once you get there."

"But... that's not how it is?"

"The light... it is white, and it was quite soothing... but you're not drifting toward it effortlessly, as if on a gentle breeze... it's sucking you in, dragging you, kicking and screaming."

"If you're going to heaven or whatever, shouldn't it be enjoyable?"

She squirmed slightly. "Maybe it would have been... but I didn't want to go. I knew why I died, and I accepted it, but... I didn't want to forsake this plane just yet."

"Why not?"

"Harry... can we please not talk about this anymore? It's... I'd just as soon not think about it."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have brought it up, it was-"

A slight smile. "Don't fret over it. I suppose I'd want to know, too."

"What an insensitive git I am. I should've realized it'd be a painful memory."

"I was in the light for a moment... just a moment, and it felt so warm, but I couldn't stand it, because... I felt so out of place. And then, I was speeding away from it... and... and I was in the loo." Her smile became more pronounced. "I don't think I'd ever been so glad to see a toilet."

Harry laughed. "I'm just glad my half-arsed idea worked."

"I know Dumbledore said your actions are considered Dark, but... I can't quite say I agree."

He grinned. "I'd do it again. Anytime."

Despite his best efforts, Harry eventually succumbed to fatigue, his head coming to rest on Hermione's shoulder. She started to move him, but could think of no pressing need to do so. A contented sigh escaped her lips as she held him there, staring into the blinding dawn as black, bittersweet tears fell, splashing on her lapels and soaking Harry's raven locks.

"If but this could last forever..."

To Be Continued

Chapter Fifteen: Strange Bedfellows

"Wake up, sleepy heads!"

"I'm not asleep," Hermione said irritably. "He is, though."

Harry blinked groggily, and found his face was against something soft. He moved an experimental hand upwards, to test what he was laying on, and immediately heard a gasp.

"Oh!"

As his eyes shot open, he realized that what was under his hand seemed to be - for lack of a better word - squishy.

"HAROLD... JAMES... POTTER!!! YOU UNHAND ME THIS INSTANT!!!"

Blushing furiously, he sat bolt upright, something that caused his head to swim.

"Sorry," he mumbled, "I didn't- didn't know it was your- your-"

Laughter. He heard muffled laughter, and looked up. Standing close by on the bridge were Ginny, Ron and Neville. Their mirthful faces were all hidden behind their hands.

"I wasn't feeling her up!!!"

Hermione's pale face was contorted in an embarrassed rage, threatening to go back to and beyond its normal hue without the help of any elixirs. She was shaking, her black eyes smouldering like hot coals, and her arms were folded tightly over her chest. Harry involuntarily began to inch away from her.

"YOU- YOU-"

"Hermione, I swear by all that is holy, I never-"

Without another word, she leapt to her feet and sprinted toward the fortress. Immediately, Ron and Neville broke into loud guffaws, and Ginny started rolling on the ground.

"SOD YOU GITS!!!" Harry shouted, stumbling to his feet and running after her.

When he reached the spare room, he found her there, pacing furiously, letting off loud, exasperated noises at regular intervals. Her arms were still crossed.

"Hermione-"

"Out!" she shouted the instant she'd realized he was there.

"You've got to listen to me-"

"OUT!"

"But it was only-"

"GET THE FUCK OUT!!!"

He did as he was told.

Nearly an hour and a half went by before she found him lurking in the pantry, idly staring at all the bags of dragon feed.

"Harry?"

"What?!" he spat.

She sat down on a stack of feed timidly. "I'm sorry for blowing up like that. I was... I was embarrassed, nobody'd ever touched me like that before... well, not while I was awake, in any case..."

He nodded grudgingly. "I didn't mean to do that, you know. I'd just woken up, I didn't know where I was, or-"

"I realized that," she said softly. "And I know you were trying to tell me before, but... it took my brain a good while to calm down from the outrage of it all. I mean, not only did you, er, handle my Quaffles, but there were spectators!"

He rolled his eyes. "The three of them were in a right state after you went inside. I hope Ginny bruised something."

"What?"

"Nothing." He shook his head thoughtfully. "This kind of thing has got to end. I need to stop sleeping with you, Hermione."

She blushed slightly. "Poor choice of words, there."

"Why do you think I used them?"

She playfully punched him in the arm, and he pounced, tickling her in retaliation until she was even bluer in the face, sending infectious, hysterical laughter echoing through the fortress. Eventually, they ended on top of a stack of rugs in the corner, panting.

"Well," he eventually managed, "that was... corking good fun."

"I think we'd better... reschedule our... our rematch."

"Wh... wha?"

She sat up slowly, massaging her ribs. "We'd better... go, y'know."

"S'pose you're right... they'll think we're back here... getting our ends away..."

A breathy laugh. "I'm sure they do..."

As she turned to look at him, still caught in mid-laugh, their gaze locked for a moment, noses mere inches apart. Harry expected himself to flinch from staring into those shadowy, ominous eyes, but found he didn't. Perhaps he'd just gotten used to it, but... maybe it was because he could see past them, through to the soul inside. He

swallowed hard as he tried to deter his heart from racing, though he didn't understand why it wanted to. What had they been talking about? Did it matter anymore? Despite this dismissive thought, it came back to him as he saw her lips part slightly and felt his own do the same: 'They'll think we're back here getting our ends away.' Why was that so awful, again? Slowly, as if sinking through water, they gravitated toward each other...

Even as he stared deep into her bottomless eyes, they seemed to turn from black to a dark grey. He'd had scarcely a nanosecond to wonder at this before she turned aside and sneezed over his shoulder.

"Gesundheit," he said distractedly, still mesmerized.

"Er, let's get out of here," she muttered, getting to her feet as she sniffled.

"R-right."

When their eyes briefly met again as she helped him up, Hermione's were as black as they'd ever been. Had he imagined it?

i i i i

"The lovebirds return!" Neville called out.

"Give over," Harry muttered.

"So, Mr. Potter," Ron said, using his wand as a microphone, "how does it feel to be rid of that pesky virginity?"

"I said give it a rest!"

Ron laughed. "Just giving you a bit of a hard time, mate. Don't take it to heart."

"It's disgusting," Hermione grumbled. "You should be ashamed."

"Well, he did give your knocker a good squeeze, didn't he?" Neville chimed in.

Hermione merely stuck her tongue out, which Harry thought was extremely strange of her (and not just because it turned out to be as blue as her lips).

"Look," Harry said wearily, "I woke up and didn't know where I was, and my 'pillow' was warmer than a pillow ought to be, so I felt it. I had no idea what my hand would be coming into contact with, and if I had, I can assure you I wouldn't have put it there. Can we please just let this die before I hex you all to kingdom come?"

Still grinning, Ron said, "All right, all right. Just having a bit of fun is all."

"I know."

"But how was it?" he whispered.

"Ronald!" Hermione shouted.

"I mean, was it nice and firm?"

"RON!!!" both of them shouted in unison.

"Okay, okay! Y'know, a bloke would almost think you left your funny bones back there in your 'den of iniquity'!"

Neither of them were too keen to talk to him the rest of the day.

Eventually, they realized that flying home was not the only course of action. Luna, whom had been outside petting the thestrals, was most displeased to hear their new plan.

"But Floo powder is so boring. It'd be much nicer to just fly back on the thestrals."

"Well, you can go back that way, if you like," Neville said. "I'd rather use the Floo."

"Besides," Harry continued, "we can't just go landing on the grounds during the daytime; we'll be seen. We'd have to wait for nightfall, and if we do that, we'll be missing even longer than we already are. We've got to send our horsie friends back alone and go by fireplace, it's the only way."

Just then, Charlie came back into the sitting room.

"I've just got word back from Dad," he said. "It seems all systems are go."

"Still connected, then?" Ron asked. His brother merely nodded.

"All right," Harry said, standing. "Let's get cracking."

"I'd like to see you off, but I've got to get back to work," Charlie said cheerily as they went back to their room for their things. "Good luck!"

iiii

The Shrieking Shack was as dingy and depressing as it had been three years ago. Harry, Ron and Hermione calmly stepped from under the mantle, but Ginny and Neville were quite jumpy. Luna seemed to think it was the nicest place ever invented, and a look of wonder was fixed on her face as they walked through the dank old mansion.

"Okay," Harry said, shouldering his broom, "let's hurry, now. The longer we're gone, the more likely it is they'll have a dozen Aurors sweeping England for us."

Hogsmeade was bright and cheery in the late-Spring sunshine. It would have been an enjoyable walk to Honeydukes if they weren't pressed for time; as it was, the elegantly-decorated shop windows and friendly passerby were almost annoying to the addled travelers.

"Why on earth did we have to use the Shrieking Shack?" Ron said, brushing a spiderweb from his shoulder with a grimace. "Like I don't already have enough bad memories of that old place."

"We can't just turn up in the Gryffindor common room," Hermione whispered, "we'll be seen. This was the least-treacherous Floo route I could think of taking."

"Then explain to me why we're going to the sweetshop?" Luna asked, hefting a rucksack containing an extremely heavy jar.

"There's a trap door in the basement," Ron muttered. "And keep that under your hat, if you please. The less people know about it, the better."

One by one, as the others browsed the shop, they slipped down to the basement and into the tunnel. Harry was last to avoid the shopkeeper and disappear through the hole in the floor.

"Ow!"

"Sorry, I didn't know you'd all be gathered at the bottom of the steps. All right?"

"Yeah." It was Ron's voice. "Let's get going, then?"

They flew down the tunnel in a half-crouch. It suddenly occurred to Harry that this tunnel wasn't really built for multiple rule-breakers, as they kept stepping on feet and bumping into one another. At long last, they reached the stone slide.

"Okay," he whispered. "Now... I haven't thought about this part."

"WHAT?!"

"Shh!"

"Quiet, quiet." Harry adjusted his glasses, and suddenly a wandtip flared - it belonged to Neville. "I'll go up first, and make it back to the common room. I'll get my cloak, then come back for the rest of you-"

"What good will a cloak do?" Luna asked.

"Shh!"

"Right, well, here I go."

Harry slipped out of the statue and into its shadow. The hallway appeared to be deserted. He cautiously peered around the edge, then sprinted for Gryffindor tower.

Amazingly enough, he met little resistance. Several Hufflepuffs and the occasional younger Gryffindor seemed interested in why he was in such a rush, but he merely waved as he raced down the corridors. Peeves took the opportunity to chuck an eraser and several phials of liquid at him, but he ducked them and pressed on, earning him a raspberry from the irritated poltergeist. Upon entering the common room, he saw Seamus sitting in an armchair, but he was nodding lazily. He stole upstairs and grabbed the shimmering cloak from his trunk, whirled it over himself, grabbed the Marauder's Map, and swept from the room at a hundred miles per hour. He saw no one on his return trip, and soon he was tapping the statue and sliding down to his comrades.

"Alright, I'm back, let's-"

"Harry, it's awful!"

He didn't like the sound of that - her voice sounded like it was near tears. "What's awful, Ginny?"

"Hermione!"

Neville's wandtip was focused on the aforementioned prefect, who was flat on her back, her head tossing to and fro. Harry immediately dropped the map and the cloak, rushing to her side.

"What is it?!"

"Don't know!" Ron was positively frantic. "She just, just, fell over!"

"There was a strangled kind of gasp," Ginny whispered. "I- I don't know what to do, she-"

"Let's get her back to the hospital wing," Ron hissed.

"No," Harry said quickly, his voice quaking. "The Draught is wearing off. We've got to act soon or it'll be too late."

Neville looked up, his face set determinedly. "What do we do?"

iiii

"I've just seen young Potter in the hallway. They're back, Headmaster."

"I know."

"What should be done with them?"

"I am... uncertain."

The silence was deafening as they withdrew into their thoughts for a moment.

"Shall I intercept them?"

"I don't think that will be necessary."

"But they so carelessly flaunted nearly every rule in the-"

"I am aware."

"Their wanton disregard nearly cost them their own necks, Headmaster. Had Alastor and the others not been following them-"

"Yes, yes. But they were, and Miss LeStrange is now in our custody. No harm, no foul."

"So you're just-"

"I haven't decided just yet, but I've relocated that issue to the back burner. Their means may be questionable, but the end is honorable, wouldn't you agree?"

A pause. "Then what shall we do?"

Albus Dumbledore leaned back, sighing deeply. He felt more weary than he had in quite some time. "Go to their aide. At the moment, that is far more important than reprimand. If they are to do this foolish thing, we must ensure that it is done properly."

A much longer, extremely tense pause. "Very well."

iiiiii

The door to the Room of Requirement burst open as four students rushed a feverish girl inside. A hospital bed lay at the far end, and a table with two cauldrons on it was to the left of it. Taking no notice of any other oddities or features in the room, they carefully lowered the girl onto the bed, then sank into a nearby couch. Rather, three of them did.

"Now we wait... for Ginny," Harry panted, stroking Hermione's hair.

iiiiii

Ginerva Weasley clutched a stitch in her side as she pelted inside the Gryffindor common room, flowing red locks flying behind her as if her head were alight.

"Bag under the bed... bag under the bed..."

The stairs blurred as she ran up toward a door she'd never entered before.

"Bag under the... bed..."

She flung it open, eyes darting around the unfamiliar room.

"It's on the right..."

There. A black leather case with the words "Broomstick Servicing Kit" emblazoned across it in silver, sitting open on a nightstand. She nearly dove across the room and under the bed, hands grasping for anything-

"Got it!" she breathed.

At that moment, she heard a voice behind her that made her blood run cold.

"What have we here? A girl in a boys' dormitory? I do hope you're not planning any... lewd activities."

She slowly backed from under the bed, releasing the strap of the bag she'd just found. Being caught was one thing, but getting the ingredients confiscated...

"Where are Potter and Granger?"

The question startled her, and its source was much nearer than it had been, but she regained her composure quickly. "Who?"

"Don't be stupid. This is not the time nor the place to try my patience. You will acquire the ingredients and lead me to the others or I will be forced to take the information directly from your airy little skull and go there alone."

iiii

"If she's dying, then why does she look better?"

Harry shook his head, but he knew exactly what Luna meant. Hermione's eyes were a slowly-lightening grey, and her red irises were tinged with brown. Not only that, but her lips had gone violet.

"Damnit!" Ron suddenly burst out. "Where is my thick sister?! You'd think we asked her to find the Holy Grail! Stupid, fucking prat!"

Neville tried to calm him down as Harry watched. Ron's frustration was unjustified, but completely understandable.

"Th..."

"What, what is it?!"

Hermione's lips parted again, and her voice was barely audible. "The draught... f-failing... I'm reverting... back to a c-cadaver..."

"Don't speak, save your strength, try to... try to hang on," he said, desperate to give her the correct advice.

"Harry... I n-n-need-"

"Shh!"

"But I... I have to t-tell..."

"...oh, just say it," he whispered. Whatever she wanted to say seemed to be important, and it would waste more of her precious energy if she kept arguing with him.

"H... I... I-lh..."

She coughed, and could speak no more, though her eyes kept staring up at him, shining more dully than he would have liked. Thick, inky tears were streaming from the corners as she continued to work her mouth, desperate to get it to function, to convey her message.

"I have to tell you something, too," he said, feeling his heart beating faster, full of fear for the dying woman before him. "I kept meaning to say it, but... it just..."

Her eyes were expectant as her breathing grew more and more ragged.

"Thank you," he breathed, stroking her face. "For saving me. I never said it, and I meant to, and... you'll never know how much... thank you."

Though he could barely see any change, the hints of a smile were unmistakable - a slight crinkle near the edge of the eyes, and the corners of the mouth raising ever so slightly. She gave a ghost of a nod, and lay back. He noticed her eyes were only nominally off-white as they closed.

"Hermione?"

Her breathing was slowing.

"HERMIONE!!!"

As Harry's shaking hands gripped her shoulders, the door behind him banged open. The four of them whirled, and Neville nearly passed out.

Severus Snape took several quick strides forward, black cloak billowing behind him, his hand firmly clasped around Ginny's wrist. Her other hand was holding Harry's schoolbag, and her eyes were wide and fearful.

"Sorry, Harry, but he- he was-"

"Silence!" Snape spat. His eyes narrowed as he scanned the room, then flicked over Harry, Ron, Luna, Neville, the dying form on the bed, and came to the table, which the rucksack now sat upon. He was still scanning the table when he spoke.

"How long has it been since you last administered the Reanimation Draught?"

Harry blinked. He had been sure the next thing out of Snape's mouth would be "Fifty points from Gryffindor."

"Er... excuse me, sir?"

"How long... has it been... since you last administered... the Reanimation Draught?" he repeated slowly. He flung Ginny's arm away from him, and she rubbed it ruefully.

"I don't know... about a week, I think."

His narrowed eyes sharpened and snapped up to look at him. They moved to Hermione's slowly rising chest for a brief moment before returning. "Impossible. You had to have readministered since that night."

"I... used Ron's wand."

"Unicorn tail-hair core," Ron put in.

Snape pierced Harry for several seconds with a look that was quite unreadable. Then, to Harry's astonishment and utter disbelief, he saw a smile tug at one corner of the Potions master's mouth.

"You'll only weaken your mixture if you put that ipswigel root in there," Snape said, his eyes moving to the phial of grayish powder laying next to the cauldron. "Do use common sense, Potter."

The next half hour passed something like what Harry imagined a proper Potions class being; Snape was watching like a greasy-haired hawk, berating him for near mistakes, suggesting proper methods of stirring, and summoning appropriate tinctures to add to the cauldron. Ron was sitting as if on needles, his face quite pale, and handing them ingredients they needed intermittently. Luna seemed a bit disappointed when they actually had to use Tempestia's heart, and spent the rest of the time sitting on the arm of the couch, nervously glancing at the bed. Ginny had screamed when Harry suddenly cut his arm open to spurt blood into the cauldron, and was weeping with her head in her hands. Neville continuously checked Hermione's pulse, and every time he did, he seemed even more distraught. At last, Harry stepped back and wiped his forehead, but Snape leaned toward Hermione and tipped a thin phial of something dark-purple into her mouth.

"Wh-what are you doing?" Ron asked.

"This will slow the decay," he said as if Ron should've already known this. "We must let the elixir brew for an hour, and it would be quite the waste of my time if Miss Granger did not stay alive to make use of it." He turned to Harry. "Or better yet... I don't suppose you saved any of the Draught ingredients?"

"No, I... used them all."

Snape nodded curtly. "It's just as well you did. She should be able to cling to life long enough for us to complete the elixir." He began pacing.

They all remained absorbed in their own thoughts and anxieties for a long while. Finally, Harry spoke hesitantly. "P-professor?"

A slight grunt was the only indication he was listening. He did not stop pacing.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"Helping us... I mean, you loathe us."

Snape stopped and stared at him. For some reason, an insulted, mildly irritated look was on his face. "Just because you are poor Potions tyros, and I detest rabble-rousers such as yourselves, does not mean I wish to see a student of mine - ANY student - die."

He glared down at Harry for a few seconds before he continued pacing, occasionally stopping to stir the mixture with Ron's wand. Some time passed before Harry spoke again.

"Professor-"

"What?!"

Harry blinked a few times. "I just... I wanted to say something."

"Then quit skirting around it and speak, foolish child."

He ignored the minuscule flare of anger and pressed on; he'd been meaning to say this last year, but never had the chance. "About what I saw in the Pensieve last-" He broke off when he saw that Snape had raised his wand.

"What did I tell you, Potter?"

"I haven't told anyone, I swear!"

Ron looked utterly bewildered. "What you saw in the what?!" The others' looks held similar sentiments. Neville looked faint.

Snape's eyes were alive with a cold fire that Harry had not seen on many occasions; he had a suspicion that most who saw his eyes like this did not live to comment on it. "You were never to mention-"

"I only wanted to say that I'm sorry!"

"As well you should be, you insufferable ingrate! I offer you a chance to gird your mind, against my own better judgement, and you repay me-"

"Not about looking at it!"

Snape stopped, the fury still radiating from him. "What, then?!"

"I'm sorry for what happened!"

The fury ebbed, replaced by a scathing look of pure abhorrence. "Listen now, and listen well. I do not need the famous Harry Potter to show pity on me for the actions of his father, events that transpired decades ago and are quite beyond what consists of HIS BUSINESS."

Ron was looking from Harry to Snape. "What the bloody hell..?!"

But Harry could merely spare Ron a brief glance and shake of the head. As much as he despised him, as much as the Potions Master's odious attitude frustrated him, he could not bring himself to reveal anything so humiliating, so degrading... even if it was about Snape. His father and godfather had been alarmingly flippant about defaming the poor man, and he could take no pleasure in that.

As the silence deepened once again, Ron and the others sat in puzzlement, Snape began pacing faster than before, and Harry wondered why he had to be the one to endure such secrets. Hermione's deformity, Snape's shame... his own grave destiny. It was as if the world had meant the lightning-shaped scar on his forehead

to mark him as a safety deposit box for undesirable information. Undoubtedly, someone would eventually make him their Secret-Keeper, and he would probably end up being tortured to death due to his remarkable ability to keep his mouth shut.

"There we are," Snape said, interrupting Harry's musings. He put out the flames with a wave of Ron's wand, then began stirring. "The elixir has achieved optimum consistency. It should be administered directly."

Harry looked up at the cauldron, and noticed it was a deep, blood red, and appeared to be of a creamy texture. He began ladling it into a goblet.

"This should be amusing," Snape muttered as he tossed the wand back to Ron.

"And why is that?" Harry said, not looking up.

"Oh." Snape peered at him for a moment before he continued, a gleam playing in his eye. "You haven't read the last bit of instructions. That has always been one of your many impediments in my class."

Harry snatched up his notebook skeptically, found the last few lines of instructions, and almost dropped the goblet in abject horror.

"I believe I'll be staying for this," Snape said wickedly.

"What, what's going on?" Ron asked, sounding quite annoyed at being kept in the dark for so long.

Frantically, Harry's eyes flicked over all the people in the room, staring at him - the people that would be witnessing what came next. "I, er... no, this can't be right-"

"But it is." If Snape had enough joy in him left to grin, he would have done; instead, he simply smirked. "You do know why they call it 'The Mourning Lover's Elixir', do you not?"

"WHAT IS IT?!" Ron shouted.

Harry became aware that his hand was shaking so badly that drops were falling from the rim of the chalice and onto his shoe. Hip grinding against the edge of the table to avoid collapsing, his next words were hoarse and strained.

"I've got to... I've got to..."

Leaning forward ever-so-slightly, the Potions Master spoke low, relishing each and every syllable as if a sip of the finest vintage, black eyes glittering with nothing short of delight.

"Kiss her."

To Be Continued

Chapter Sixteen: Experiencing Agapé

Arcane And Obscure Elixirs and Draughts, p. 237

THE ELIXIR OF AGAPE

INGREDIENTS

- 1 forget-me-not seed
- 1/2 oz. white rice
- 1 ginger root
- 6 oz. Mandrake Restorative Draught
- 1 oz. ground flaxweed
- 1 chocolate-covered strawberry
- 1 oz. blood of the brewer (approx.)
- 7 dove feathers
- 2 oz. red wine (a fine vintage, if handy)
- 2 matching wedding bands
- 1 dragon heart

IMPLEMENTS

- Wand
- 2 pewter cauldrons
- Ladle
- Mortar and Pestle
- Cutting board, knife
- Empty phial/beaker/bowl

DESCRIPTION

The Elixir of Agapé, also known as "The Mourning Lover's Elixir", has a similar effect to the Elixir of Life - that is to say, it will bring someone back from death's maw. This potion has been known to work on the undead, the petrified, the paralysed, the comatose, the fatally injured, the deathly ill, and the recently deceased (though it must be administered within a few hours of their demise). The ingredients listed above are not set in stone, but the ones listed here are all quite necessary (save perhaps the chocolate-covered strawberry). You may, of course, add anything else you feel may increase its potency, but exercise caution - the wrong ingredient may weaken or sabotage the mixture. One should also note that while the ingredients will most likely serve their purpose no matter the means one uses to obtain

them, they will be far more effective if freshly gathered (particularly the dragon heart) and at great cost to the wizard or witch brewing it, due to the potion's nature. While this is quite a powerful elixir, it is but a potent catalyst for love, and without the presence of strong, unswerving affection and a true longing to revive the victim, you may as well be trying to fight off an Acromantula with a handful of pebbles.

DIRECTIONS

Chop your ginger root ahead of time, making quite sure to slice it thin. In a separate cauldron, burn the dove feathers, making sure you save the ashes in a phial or beaker of some sort. Then, place the dragon heart in your main cauldron; any amount of blood you may have from the same dragon can only help, so be sure to empty the jar of any. Open a fresh wound somewhere on your person and allow approximately one ounce of your blood to flow over the dragon heart. It is **MOST IMPORTANT** that this be your blood, and not anyone or anything else's. Following this, immediately pour the Mandrake Restorative Draught over the heart, then light a mid-level fire underneath the cauldron. Add the forget-me-not seed, the feather ashes, the flaxweed, the wine, and the ginger root at once, stirring with your wand. Using a wand with a unicorn tail-hair core is recommended - or possibly a unicorn horn in place of a wand (it is inadvisable to use unicorn blood, as obtaining it would reverse the elixir's polarity, and both yourself and the subject would become hollow shells of your former selves). As this simmers, grind the rice with mortar and pestle. After the solution has been heated for five minutes, add the powdered rice. Also add the chocolate-covered strawberry at this point, and be sure to remove the stem first. Allow to brew for one hour, stirring occasionally.

IMPORTANT NOTE: The wedding bands are not actually used in the brewing of the potion, but are most important when administering it. One must be on the right ringfinger of both the victim and the person applying the elixir; it strengthens the connection between them. You may want to take this time to slip these on, if you and the victim are not already wearing them.

After the solution has boiled for an hour, extinguish the fire and stir vigorously (if you've been stirring with a unicorn horn, it must be with a wand this time), then ladle an amount of the contents into a chalice.

You must drink at least three ounces of this solution (six recommended), and pour an equal amount down the throat of the subject to be awakened. One more small sip must be administered orally, directly from your lips to the victim's. It doesn't hurt to hold their hand; this aides in the conductivity of the feelings required to empower this elixir. This mouth-to-mouth passing of fluids completes the process, and if you are successful, the subject should reawaken in under five minutes.

iiii

"Merlin," Ron said, after having read it for himself. He let the notebook fall to the table as he returned his attention to the room at large.

Harry's lips were moving without fruition. Luna was twirling her dirty-blond hair anxiously. Ginny and Neville were tensed, breath baited for someone to react. Snape, whom had also been leering at this amusing scene, walked to the head of Hermione's would-be deathbed, folded his arms, and stood, waiting patiently for the show to truly begin.

"It's... it's too weird," Harry mumbled. "I, I can't, not in front of- in front of-"

"But you've got to!" Ginny suddenly hissed, grasping his shoulder firmly, her eyes shining. "I know it's strange, but... but we have to save Hermione!"

"If you won't do it, I will," Neville said bravely, though he was plainly scared out of his mind.

"No, I... I can do this." Harry took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "Besides, I'm the only one that can do it now... my blood is in the potion. This is for Hermione... if I can't even do something this simple for her sake, then I should be hanged."

He tipped the chalice to his lips, quickly gagged how much elixir was inside, and drew deeply at the contents, draining it completely. It was a sickly sweet flavour, and while not entirely unpleasant, it still made

him a bit nauseous. He then returned to the cauldron, refilled it, and went to Hermione's side.

"Time for your medicine," he whispered.

He lifted her stiffening head and poured the crimson contents down her throat, careful to make sure it all went down.

"And now, the grand finale," Snape muttered.

Harry determinedly slowed his heartbeat. He knew what was coming, and as much as he dallied as he returned to the cauldron, raised the ladle, and poured more elixir inside, it seemed all too soon he was standing over her again. He glanced at her right hand - the ring was still there. He could feel the other one on his own finger.

"Potter, may I remind you that you don't have an eternity-"

"I know," he hissed, wishing Snape would vaporize and leave him be. He swallowed hard as he looked down at her, and his heart was rent in two.

The cheeks of the girl before him were now paler than parchment. Her lips, the lips that had been trying to tell him something of the utmost importance, were still and unmoving, slightly wet from the elixir passing through them. Her eyes - those bewitching eyes that had been alight with knowledge and cleverness, with bravery, with fondness - were closed. Harry found it surreal that she were dead, and he would be breathing the life back into her, when really she looked like she were sleeping very soundly. He raised a hand and brushed aside a lock of her fluffy hair, stroking her icy cheek on the way back. It did not matter that they had sworn to be only friends, nor did it matter that she was more than a girl... for her condition didn't make her less of a woman - it made her even greater.

"Harry," Ron whispered, leaving it at that.

Harry knew what must be done, and suddenly realized that it didn't seem like such an obligation, but more of a sacred duty; he wanted to do this more than anything.

The goblet moved to his mouth, and he allowed a small amount to flow inside, rolling it on his tongue. He felt Ginny's shaking hands take it from him as he bent low over the bed, and slowly moved his head down toward her soft, delicate lips. His thumb moved to her chin, drawing her mouth open so very slightly. The other hand felt down along her arm and found hers, gripping it tightly, desperately. Giving himself wholly to his passion, anguish, joy, and sorrow, he took the piteous form in a frantic kiss.

Hot tears swelled and cascaded down his cheekbones. A part of him realized she would not kiss back, but most of him ached for her to suddenly revive and do so, to draw his body to hers and envelop his soul. But she did not, and yet he kept straining at her, his desperate tongue coaxing hers, unmoving and cold, the tingling of the nauseatingly sweet fluid they were sharing laughing callously at his efforts. He could feel happiness draining from every inch of his being, flowing through him and out. Finally, he could bear it no longer, and he flung himself away from her corpse and onto the floor, weeping uncontrollably.

He did not feel the hands on his shoulders. He did not feel the couch rise under him. He did not feel the hands moving over his arms, his knee, his shoulders. All he felt was deep, searing, biting agony - one that his scar could never hope to best if it tried for the rest of eternity. His hands went to his face, and found his glasses - he hurled them away, and did not hear them shatter, nor someone muttering "Reparo" and placing them nearby. He wanted to leave this place, he wanted to die. More than anything at that moment, he just wanted to die, and be forever removed from this unsurpassable misery.

And then, as if a direct argument against what he was feeling, Neville breathed, "Look!" as Ginny pushed his glasses back onto his nose.

Slowly, his head raised, and his gaze met the one and only thing that had a prayer of quelling the howling pain within him. Hermione, seated on the edge of her bed, was staring straight at him. Her cheeks were an elegant peach once again, almost as if made of porcelain. The mark on her forehead had vanished without a trace.

Her eyes, twinkling in the low light, were back to their usual white and copper, and her pink lips were smiling.

"Boy, why are you crying?"

"I'm not crying," he choked, rubbing his eyes in vain. "I've got something in my eye."

"Your hand, for one," she said. He let out a blast of laughter, and she sniffed.

In perfect synchronization, they flew from their perches and met, arms wrapping around each other, tears coming as if their flow would never be stemmed, strangled voices barely managing to speak further, but valiantly persevering.

"Harry..."

"I- thank God, you... Hermione..."

As his eyes fluttered open for a brief moment, he saw Snape standing there, but to his astonishment, the former Slytherin did not look smug, nor bored or disgusted. He looked almost... triumphant. Even as Harry's gaze fell on him, a dark eye threatened a wink, he nodded slightly, then strode from the room, leaving them alone.

In fact, he seemed to have made this something of a cue, as Luna, Ron, Ginny, and Neville all left at that moment, each of them patting them both on the back as they passed, unable to find any words. Finally, the door clanked shut, and it was just the two of them. They drew back and looked into one another's eyes.

"Hi, honey," she said playfully.

"Hello, dear."

Neither of them seemed to know where to begin. So much had happened between them, and their emotions were stretched so thin they didn't know if they could handle anything else. At last, Harry found his voice.

"So, you were saying...?"

"W-what?"

"Before you... y'know... you were trying to tell me something."

"I..." He could feel her begin to quiver, and he held her as close as he could manage. Strain showed in her features. "I don't want to say it now, Harry, I don't- You've probably already figured it out, you're so clever and brilliant, but nevertheless, it... I don't want to break what you've just mended..."

"You won't."

"But Harry, what if-"

"Say it, please," he soothed urgently, his hand moving to her cheek.

Tears rolled down her cheeks - perfect, crystal tears, so welcome a sight after the dark ones she'd been forced to shed for so long - and she moved her face as close to his as possible, her eyes searching his for a reaction even before she spoke, barely summoning a whisper.

"I love you."

And there in a room that few could reach, there beyond the dangers and troubles and atrocities of the outside world, Harry Potter and Hermione Granger shared the moment that had so cruelly been denied them in the pantry at Thirteen Fifteen, Trebuchet Lane, and a thousand other instances before. At long last, they basked in true love's first kiss.

i i i i

"I believe your exact words were, 'I'm not a bloody puff'?"

Harry and Hermione, hand in hand (this time, merely for their own benefit), were walking through the grass as the sun set behind the trees. She'd had enough of the "welcome back"s in the castle, and

they had gone to visit a tearful Hagrid, whom had hugged her so tightly Harry feared she would need Skele-Gro. After listening to him blubber for nearly an hour into a handkerchief about how glad he was that she was alive, and how sorry he was that he couldn't prevent her death in the first place, they'd bid him goodnight and were in the midst of walking aimlessly.

"And I'm still not! You're trying to get me to touch my toes for you again, and I'm not going to fall into your clever trap."

An impatient "tuh!" issued from her mouth. "No, no, I wasn't talking about that specifically!"

"But were you thinking it?" he said with a wry grin.

"Er..."

"HA!"

Her face had moved beyond beet red. "You're the one that planted the image there in the first place," she mumbled.

An eyebrow raise. "Don't try to blame me for that! It's all Ron's doing, scheming with my subconscious like that!"

"Harry, look," she said, stopping to look at him directly. "This is exactly how I mean. Things like this are going to be working against us. I... I don't particularly need to do, er, that, and I would never ask you to against your wishes, but... even if we don't, there's still going to be similar awkward problems, because of... what I am."

"I know. I hear what you're saying, and... and you're right. It's... it's going to get a touch bizarre. But..."

As he looked at her, and earnestly tried to be sober about the conversation, he couldn't help smiling.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing's funny," he said, grinning even wider.

"Stop it!"

He raised a hand and stroked her cheek. "You're so cute when you're irritated."

She went even redder, if that was possible, as she glanced down at her shoes, failing to subdue the bashful smile. "I'm never going to get used to you saying things like that." Her eyes raised to his again, piercing. "But Harry, you're avoiding the issue here. Can you really, truly accept that part of me?"

"Yes."

A few blinks, due to the unexpected readiness of his answer. "Wh-what?"

"I said 'yes', silly." He was smiling so wide he could feel his cheeks beginning to ache, yet he couldn't stop. "You may be sharp as they come, but you should have your hearing checked."

"Do you... do you mean it? You don't care that I'm... intersexed?"

"Ah, but that's a different question, isn't it?" A sigh escaped his lips unbidden. "I'm not saying it won't be a bit strange at first, but that's not the important thing. What I really care about is having you... being with you, being yours. As far as I'm concerned, what's in your knickers is a detail."

"But... if you don't mind being with someone who's half boy, wouldn't you be half-gay?"

He shrugged. "Guess so."

"You just said-"

"I know what I said." He sighed uneasily. "I just- It's not really so much that I hate man parts - I mean, I have one myself, don't I? It... I just don't want them near my bum. So you having one is fine by me. It's part of you, and as far as I'm concerned, you're perfect."

For a moment, he took her silence to mean she'd accepted this, but upon scrutinizing her features more carefully, he realized something was still bothering her. Her eyes were darting nervously, which usually meant she was trying to decide something particularly difficult.

"Out with it."

"Out with what?"

"Don't give me that nonsense. What is it?"

A very heavy sigh escaped her lips, and she looked - almost glaring - at him. If her cheeks weren't flushed and her voice wasn't quavering, he'd have mistaken it for an accusatory stare.

"Do you want me to have it?"

"...what?"

"They are doing amazing things with surgery these days, aren't they?" At this point she looked away. "So... if you wanted..."

"Do you want to have it?"

Startled, her head jerked up again, and her expression was puzzled.

"It does belong to you, Hermione. Doesn't seem fair for me to decide whether or not you keep a body part."

"I... it's always been something of a constant companion, really... debating its removal. I mean, life would be so much simpler if I were just another girl. But..."

"Yes?"

"Just as you've said, it's one of my extremities. I'm afraid that I wouldn't be the same person if I didn't have it... that I wouldn't be as unique."

Harry laughed quietly. "Like you need two sets of gonads to make you special. You've got plenty of other things to be proud of."

"Like?"

"Hmm..." His finger went to his chin dramatically.

"Stop being an ass."

"Well, you did scrape me, for one."

"Tuh!" A punch was thrown his way, which he purposefully allowed to hit him (as he knew he had more than earned it).

"That smarted a bit. You're strong." He rubbed it lightly. "Courageous. Brilliant. Passionate. Loyal... not to mention hotter than a dragon tonsil."

She turned away slightly to prevent him from seeing precisely how red her face had gone, as otiose a gesture as this was. "Oh, you do go on, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. You're sterling in my book, so if you decide against the surgery, I'm not going into fits over it. In fact, who knows, maybe I'll come to enjoy playing with your 'wand'...?"

This last sentence served exactly the purpose he'd meant it to; Hermoine gasped involuntarily, then turned even further away from him, trying without success to hide her face while stifling fits of titters. If he were to be completely honest with himself, that thought made him nearly as nervy as it appeared to have done for his partner.

"So, in closing, the responsibility for you having one or not falls entirely in your la- er, no pun intended, there, sorry."

It seemed to Harry as if eons rolled by in near silence, the passage of time marked only by Hermione slowly pacing the lawn, before she at last spoke. "I think I would like to retain my 'manhood'... I mean, I'd probably miss it once it wasn't there, despite the rather extensive list of predicaments and grief it's caused me... I mean, it's a part of me;

perhaps not my favourite part, but it's mine. We could always decide, someday down the road, that we want to do away with it, but for now... I suppose it stays."

"Good, then it's settled."

"I'll only keep it if you're absolutely sure it doesn't bother you...?"

A tut of frustration. "For the last time, it doesn't! In fact, I'm thinking of binning you and going out with just your wanger, it's so bleeding grand!"

"But-"

"I do hereby solemnly swear that I will continue to cherish and adore Hermione Granger, with or without the aforementioned appendage, and if she suddenly grows ten more, I'd still want to be with her."

Despite her best efforts, she was unable to suppress a snicker at his latest oath. "If I grew ten more, I'd be getting out the meat cleaver."

They both drew an involuntary intake of breath at that rather nasty thought, crossing their legs slightly, then laughed.

"Oh, Harry," she sighed contentedly. "You're so perfect. I never dreamed I'd meet someone who not only accepted me, but when given the choice, wanted me to stay just as I am."

He felt his face grow hot even as she briefly touched his cheek. "I guess there just aren't enough decent people out there. Different isn't a synonym for awful... in fact, variety is usually a good thing, isn't it?"

"How much I've been missing these past five years."

"How do you mean?" he muttered as his brow knitted.

"We were good friends, definitely... but before this year, there was still that slight barrier between us." She again glanced down at this. "And then I got that brief flash of ardour, and sent you the post... and, at long last, I told you... and from that moment forward, it was as if

everything would always be fine. No matter all the trouble it caused, all the arguments and storms it seemed to stir up, it seemed like so much dust that could be brushed away by our new friendship... our love," she added meekly.

"I just can't believe you held it in for so long. I wish you'd have told me sooner..."

"So do I."

They lay back under the lengthening shade of a tree, hesitant-yet-steady hands fawning over each other's bodies and faces, breath coming faster than seemed possible, reveling in one another's touch. The memory of that evening in front of the fire rushed back to Harry as if from a past life, as he breathed in that feminine, bookish spoor of hers once more; he found he reveled in it. Hermione gasped when his touch passed briefly over her pubis, and he jumped when he felt what was most definitely there; their cheeks flushed deeply, and they began casting nervous glances around the grounds. To avoid getting too bothered, they eventually settled into a comfortable position, staring into each other's eyes and caressing their cheeks, content with the nearness of their wildly beating hearts.

"How I love thee, Harry."

"Ditto."

A snort of indignation. "I bear my heart, naming you as my inamorato, and I get back a 'ditto'?"

"It's a perfectly good response."

"Like hell it is."

And she fell on top of him, giggling through their joined lips as they held each other fondly, all cares and worries reduced to unimportant drivel in the wake of their affection.

iiii

"Good news, all!"

The Gryffindors ambling around the common room, enjoying all manner of food and drink, stopped and looked up, mildly interested. Ron was standing on a chair, arms sweeping wide, his dragon-hide chapeau barely clinging to his head.

"Ladies and gents, may I present to you, Mr. and Mrs. H-"

"Ron!" Hermione hissed, giggling.

"Okay, okay," he whispered back, still grinning. "Presenting the future bride and groom: Harry Potter and Hermione Granger! Er, not that Harry's the bride and Hermione's-"

"They get the picture," Harry muttered, his glasses threatening to melt from the heat of his face. If only Ron knew how close to home that last statement had hit...

"To the happy couple!" he shouted, raising his butterbeer. The other students echoed his sentiments, and they all drank deeply.

"So," he said more quietly as he jumped down, "have the two of you consummated your relationship yet?"

This earned him a punch in the arm from both of them.

"I think it's great," Neville said, clapping Harry on the shoulder. "You guys are made for each other, you know. When's the wedding?"

"Tomorrow, of course," Hermione said, hands on hips. "I don't suppose we can produce a reverend overnight, but we'll make do, won't we?"

"Mum knows a minister," Ginny put in, grinning deviously. "Old friend of the family. Should I send an owl on?"

The party lasted long into the night, and somehow Luna turned up, presumably wandering through the portrait hole as someone else left - though Harry was not so sure she was there on accident. As

carefree and high-spirited as he felt, he could've sworn he saw Ron lead her off somewhere, but he couldn't remember for certain.

At last, after everyone else had drifted off to their beds, the time came when they had to part company, and Hermione and Harry stood at the bottom of the stairs for what seemed like all too brief a moment.

"I want there to be no tomorrows," she whispered, "that this feeling could last an age."

"But think of what tomorrow may bring," he said, grinning. A fleeting kiss, a hushed goodbye, and they retired to their dormitories, positively glowing.

iiii

"Great little shindig," Ron yawned as he entered.

"Yeah," he said dreamily, flopping down on his bed, only to find an empty butterbeer bottle in the small of his back. As he sat back up to toss it in the wastepaper basket, he looked over at the neighbouring bed.

"Ron?"

"Huh?"

"How do you feel about all this?"

Another yawn. "'Bout what?"

"Me and Hermione. I mean, this kind of changes the Three Musketeers, doesn't it?"

"Eh, whatever. One of us were going to fall in love at some point... be kind of pitiful if it never happened, really. Inevitable. At least I know the pair of you are ending up with good people, so I don't have to worry about sorting out anything or anybody. Quite a load off, to be blunt. I'm happy for you two."

Harry grinned. "Is that because you're extremely empathetic, or because you've found some sweet Ravenclaw of your very own?"

A long pause. "I really don't know what you're on about."

To Be Concluded...

Chapter Seventeen: We Will Meet Again

A month drifted by in a dream, and Harry could not recall ever having been so content in his life. Even homework and exams seemed like a treat when he shared the task with the one he loved. Fortunate did not begin to describe how he felt, but it was a start.

It became routine for her to jerk him into empty rooms between classes, for them to meet under the tables in the greenhouses, for paper airplanes to navigate their way between each other's desks, bearing messages of deepest desire, or even simple endearing phrases. Once, they had been caught in the throes of a passionate embrace during Charms, and Professor Flitwick could barely contain his bemused (and somewhat embarrassed) laughter as he docked their house a few paltry points.

One day in the final week of the term found them lying under the tree again, the sun sending scattered beams slanting down through the leaves, casting a dappled light on them. One of her fingers was tracing the cross-shaped scar in the crook of his arm - one line courtesy of Wormtail, the other his own doing. She had taken to doing this often, though every time she did, a hint of a sad tear danced in one of her eyes - too insubstantial to reveal itself, but not enough to ignore completely. Harry wished she wouldn't do this, as he couldn't stand seeing her unhappy; after all, the second line was created so they could be together again.

"You're so radiant today," he whispered as he watched the light shine from her abundant fluffy hair.

"And you," she returned fondly, smiling as her hand moved upward to his cheek. "I am with you, and I find joy."

"You are joy."

Their lips met briefly, then parted. A sigh escaped Hermione's.

"What is it, sugar-buns?"

"Stop that," she muttered, rolling her eyes. "Silly, childish nicknames."

"No, really... what's up?"

She fell onto her back and stared at the branches above them.
"Summer."

Undoubtedly, they had both been thinking of this for a while, but had not the nerve to discuss it. Now, however, Hermione wanted to, and he could not deny her what she wished.

"I know."

"I don't want it to come, but... time persists."

"Go to McGonagall and get some back?"

She smiled. "Delay the inevitable, even if for but a few hours."

"What we could do with a few hours..."

"Harry!"

They both laughed, then lapsed into a comfortable silence. She broke this again.

"What will I do?"

"Be miserable." A sigh escaped his lips as he joined her in watching the leaves. "It's all I had planned."

"Maybe this time we... we really can get you away from there... I swear, I'll try as hard as I can, I'll plead your case every chance I get..."

"I would be enthralled. To be near you is to be in heaven."

Blushing. "Stop that."

"You keep telling me to stop things, and I keep doing them. I wonder why that is?"

"It's because you're incorrigible." She thought for a moment. "And puerile. Definitely puerile."

He grinned. "Guilty. What's the Wizengamot's ruling?"

"Forty kisses."

"Not the forty kisses! Anything but that, guv!"

"Better keep quiet, or I'll make it seventy."

"La la la la, la la la-"

Her lips silenced his, and she did, in fact, count out every single one of those seventy mirthful kisses.

iiii

A hand shot out in front of Harry as he raced toward the Transfiguration classroom. He skidded to a halt just in front of it, but it moved forward, grasping his collar and jerking him into a doorway. He blinked as the door to the empty classroom slammed shut, then turned to stare into the face of his kidnapper.

"Cho! Wh-what-?"

"Is it true? You and Hermione Granger are engaged?"

The question startled him. "I- eh?"

"Are you engaged?"

"Well, no, but why-"

"Everyone says so," she said. Her face looked pained, and her shining black hair was in a right state. "Please, just be frank with me... at least this time, Harry."

"Really, we're not, we've only just started going out, it's-"

"Liar!" she shouted. "You've been going out since Christmas, I know it!"

"No, we haven't!"

"I'm getting sick of this, forget I-"

"Dammit, you stupid git, would you shut up and really listen to what I'm saying for once!"

Shock vibrated through her, and she finally let go of his collar, backing off a step. Harry took a deep, calming breath before continuing.

"I was not in denial, nor was I trying to two-time you. When I told you Hermione and I weren't dating, we weren't. Just because we are now doesn't mean you were right when you said-"

She waited for a moment, but Harry did not continue. "When I said...?"

"You were right. You were right all along."

"But you just said I was..."

Harry's face had slackened with a bemused surprise, and he slowly sat on the desk behind him. "No, I mean... when you said we weren't aware we fancied each other. I chalked it up to you believing the rumours, but... you turned out to be one-hundred percent correct. I'd been falling for Hermione all year, but I was too thick to realize it until just a few weeks ago."

He looked up at her, beginning to giggle, but he stopped short when he saw how utterly crestfallen she looked.

"Cho, what... what's wrong? I thought you'd be thrilled to know your prediction came true."

She slowly turned to leave, but he caught her arm. She turned to back to him, her almond-shaped eyes shining, and she leapt forward, attacking his mouth with her own.

Harry sat there, stunned, for several seconds, his lips adamantly set against her advances. Then he firmly grabbed her shoulders and held her at arm's length.

"What was that?"

She tried to wriggle free, but he held firm.

"Why did you do that?"

"I..." She was still fighting him.

"Explain. I think I deserve that much."

And she broke down, sobbing, sinking to the floor. He sunk with her, not about to let go before she told him.

"Harry, I've... I've been such a fool... I pushed you away, I know that now, I... I..."

"You're not making sense, what are you-?"

"I still love you."

The room was still, and it remained so for a few moments before her sobs broke the silence again.

"I've missed... missed my win- window. I should've f-fought harder for you, I- I just let you go. I'm the world's biggest p-p-prat."

"That 'scent' business, is it?" He sighed. "I hate to say it, truly I do... but you're right. I... I love Hermione."

"But we... we had something... you can't say we didn't have anything, that- that kiss, on the g-grounds, it..."

He found he could not keep the smile away. "That was rather nice, and it's something I'll never forget. But... you've got to understand, Cho... that's the past. My heart is securely in Hermione's possession, now, and hers in mine. It's the latter that's my main concern, not the former."

She looked up at him, and he felt a pang. This beautiful, fragile girl's heart had just been shattered into a thousand pieces, and the only thing he could do to mend it was the one thing he never would.

"She is so lucky."

"What?"

"You are the warmest, kindest, most honorable wizard I've ever met, Harry Potter. I envy that girl of yours... I hope she makes you very happy, because you deserve it more than anyone I know. I'll... I'll just step out of your life now." She made to leave, but he did not release her.

"Oh, no you won't. Just because I don't love you doesn't mean I hate you. You're still a brilliant girl, and a wicked-sharp Seeker."

They both stood, and she backed out of his reach, smiling as tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Maybe. But... I don't think so."

"...why not?"

"I don't think I could bear talking to you... knowing you're something I can never have. I understand why you can't be with me, but... that doesn't mean I've stopped loving you. I lost Cedric to circumstances beyond my control, but... but for losing you, I have no one to blame but poor, stupid me. Being your friend now, it's... it's far too painful."

She moved for the door again, but he blocked her path.

"Cho, don't do this. I know you'll probably come to hate me, but... I can't help it. I'm really sorry."

"It's my own damn fault!" she exclaimed tearfully. "I did everything but shove you into her arms myself!"

Another grin he couldn't suppress. "That you did. But know that... you have my eternal gratitude. I don't want you thinking that just because you played a part in my falling for Hermione that I've forgotten you exist; in fact, it's all the more reason for me to remember you." He sighed, and stepped out of the way. "But... if you need time... I'll understand."

They stood there for a quite a while. Then she smiled - a brave smile that masked a deep sadness. "Very well, Potter. But I will say this. If that Hermione of yours so much as puts a toe out of line... I'll find out, and she'll have me to answer to. I may have lost you, but I'll be damned if you get treated like dirt."

To this, Harry hadn't the slightest inkling of how to respond. He tugged at the neck of his robes, but no sound came from his mouth.

"See you around!" she said brightly, striding from the room. Harry stood there blinking for nearly two minutes before he could speak again.

"What have I landed myself in?"

i i i i i

As Harry was packing hurriedly, wanting to rush down to the end-of-year feast as soon as he could, he heard a knock on the dormitory door. He gingerly slid the snapshot of himself and Ron grinning and waving (and a zombified Hermione scowling between them, opal eyes moving left and right) into his photo album and threw it into the trunk.

"Er, come in?"

He nearly dropped his pocket Foe-Glass when Dumbledore stepped inside.

"Professor!"

"A quick word with you before the feast begins?" His face was not cheery, but not sad; Harry couldn't read it at all.

"Wh... what is it?"

"I would like to say that I am terribly disappointed in you. You thumbed your nose at the rulebook, flying off for parts unknown, and returning when you pleased. I should be taking a thousand house points from Gryffindor and expelling you." He moved to the window and stared idly out at the Quidditch pitch, hands clasped behind his back.

Harry could manage nothing more than a gulp.

"But the truth is... despite these things, I cannot. For I know why you did what you did, and the fact that you actually did it is the real matter here."

"Excuse me, but... what?"

Dumbledore smiled slightly. "The Elixir of Agapé is most certainly not something any Dark wizard could ever hope to administer. Their hearts have been so calloused by years of hatred that they do not remember just what love is. You have perhaps seen evidence of this in Professor Snape; his emotions are always as far from his sleeve as he can manage to put them."

Harry nodded as the wizened man turned to him again. He understood, but had no idea where Dumbledore was going with this.

"The truth is, despite the fact that you broke the rules and risked so much, you did manage to restore Miss Granger's life. That, more than anything, shows me that you are in no immediate danger of turning into a Death Eater. The force of love is obviously strong within your heart; it must have been, as Miss Granger is indeed back with us."

A nervous grin reached his mouth. "Thanks."

"I do feel a responsibility to reiterate what I said to you when last we spoke: you must not continue to purchase Dark texts. While I am relieved things worked out so well on this occasion, I simply do not think it would be so the next."

"Yes, Professor. Don't worry, I won't be doing any shopping down Knockturn Alley again." His eyebrows knotted. "Professor?"

"Yes, dear boy?"

"Was it... did you ask Snape to help us?"

"I did. I felt it necessary to make sure absolutely nothing went awry in the brewing of that elixir. Too many miscalculations, and Miss Granger may have been revived in a weakened state, only to pass on a few months later. Worse yet, it may have backfired, and you may have done yourself in. The Elixir is extremely powerful, and errors in use are not errors you will have an opportunity to correct. To that end, who better to oversee such a thing than a Potions master?"

Harry nodded again, and a shiver passed through him as he realized just how foolhardy brewing such an abomination was... though he didn't regret doing so for a moment. He also felt an unwanted rush of appreciation for Snape's assistance, but was mercifully distracted from it by Dumbledore.

"Before we get on with our meal, I would like one more quick word... though I should really be saying this to both of you."

"Yes, Professor?"

"Congratulations! I trust I will be invited to the ceremony, of course... and if you could just have Hedwig inform me of the shops at which you're registered, I would greatly appreciate it. Gifts for newlyweds aren't the easiest to pick out."

And before Harry could sputter out a response to this, his blue eyes once again twinkling merrily behind those half-moon spectacles, the bemused headmaster left the dormitory.

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It was a subdued Harry and Hermione that stared out the window of the Hogwarts Express as it snaked through the countryside. Neither the fact that Gryffindor had won the Quidditch Cup again, nor that they had also managed to scrape the House Cup, did anything to raise their spirits. The tiny, warm, safe corner of the world they had spent a month building was about to be silenced, thrown into a glass case to be gazed at wistfully until the Summer was over and they could enjoy it again.

"Cheer up, you somber bunch," Ron said, slightly annoyed with them. "You're not off to the guillotine."

"Might as well be," Hermione muttered, fiddling with her crystal (light brown, once again).

"I feel like I've got a dementor in my pocket," Harry grumbled. He was also toying with his necklace.

Just then, as if waiting for the perfect opportunity to rub salt in wounds, Draco Malfoy stuck his head in.

"Oi, Potter. Mudblood. Weasley." He spat all three of these with equal disgust.

"Hello, Lucius Junior," Harry said coldly. "You all right? You're looking a little... green."

Draco's face somehow went a bit paler, and it almost seemed as if he began shaking ever so slightly. "Good to see Granger didn't snuff it, after all. That is, I've got to have something to look at next term when I need to induce vomiting - it makes skiving so much easier." With that, he left. It seemed to Harry that his tones weren't as harsh as they normally were, but he couldn't tell if that had to do with his renewed death threat, or... something else. But that was silly; Draco

Malfoy was not one to harbour respect for Griffyndors, no matter the circumstances.

"How rude," Luna said, going back to The Quibbler. Harry noticed she was sitting suspiciously close to Ron, but Ron didn't seem to be taking any notice of this.

At that moment, Cho walked by the door and stopped to look in on them. It seemed to Harry as though she must have been standing there for a few moments before he noticed this, but as soon as she realized he was looking back at her, she smiled briefly, then moved on.

"Why was she staring at me as if I were acting dodgy?" Hermione whispered. Harry did not answer her.

Much too soon for either of their liking, the train arrived at Platform Nine-And-Three-Quarters. As they grabbed their things and stepped off, Harry felt the knot in his stomach tighten as they bid Seamus, Dean, Parvati, and Neville goodbye. He did not want to do this. He wanted to grab her arm and haul her back aboard the train, perhaps to just sit there for the entire Summer, but to at least be near each other. Alas, he knew that was an impossibility.

Silence fell thick and heavy as they approached the barrier to the Muggle world. Harry and Hermione squeezed their hands together, keeping tight hold on their trolleys with the others, and rushed through the barrier after Ron and Ginny, who were now talking with Mad-Eye Moody, wearing the same bowler hat he had a year ago, today.

"Harry, Hermione!"

Mrs. Weasley came bounding over to them, catching them in a hug so tight it could flatten the pancreas. "How've you been? Charlie says you paid him a visit, is this true!"

Eventually, the joyous welcomes went around from Mrs. Weasley and the Grangers, and Moody had shaken hands with them all, overlarge electric-blue eye swiveling in its socket behind the shadow of his brim,

searching for any nosing Muggles or lurking Death Eaters. Suddenly, a weary-looking man stepped forward, and Harry saw he was wearing a rather shoddy grey suit.

"All right, Harry?" the man said, grinning.

"All right, Moony."

Remus rolled his eyes, his grin as broad as ever. "Two can play at that. Should I be calling you Mr. Granger, or is she Mrs. Potter?"

Harry blushed, hurriedly stuffing his right hand in his pocket. "Er, yeah, about that..."

The lot of them would have perhaps spent all day standing around King's Cross, laughing and catching up with each other, if Uncle Vernon hadn't eventually turned up, clearing his throat. They slowly began to disperse, going back to their respective vehicles, but he heard Hermione say "I'll meet you at the car" at the same moment he said this to Uncle Vernon.

"You'll do no such thing!" Uncle Vernon growled. "It's bad enough the ruddy traffic slowed us down, and I'll have no more delays! You'll come now, or-"

"-or what?" he asked. "Listen, I just want to have a word with one of my mates. I'll be along in a minute. Unless you want me to tell that friendly chap in the bowler that you wouldn't even let me say a proper goodbye...?"

Eying the nearby Moody warily and sputtering like a madman, his uncle stomped off toward the exit, pushing Harry's trolley carelessly and causing Hedwig to cry out, which only served to make the portly man grow yet angrier.

Hermione was waiting for him. She was merely standing there, hands clasped neatly in front of her, staring up at him shyly, her feet shifting in morbid anticipation. Luna and Ron, sharing a farewell handshake, looked between them, grinned knowingly, then left as well.

Ashamedly, Harry was tempted to simply wave and call out, "See you!" before dashing after the pair of them... to avoid the long, painful goodbye. But he could not do that to her, or to himself. He wanted more, and she certainly deserved it.

"Another dull Summer," he said, falsely cheerful.

"Yep." She smiled sadly. "Another Summer without Harry."

"Another Summer without my queen."

A weak laugh. "Queen?"

"Hermione was a queen, wasn't she?"

Her brow furrowed for only the briefest of moments before a look of surprised adoration took over. "You read it!"

"Verily," he chuckled. "Though I had trouble finding it at Hogwarts, I can tell you. Had to borrow it from a Ravenclaw."

"Harry, you..." At a loss for how to convey her feelings, she bowed deeply. "Leontes, my king."

"Come off it, people are staring!" he hissed, blood rushing to his cheeks.

Her head raised, an expression of mock puzzlement hitched into place. "He something seems unsettled."

"Enough of this, or I'll haul you away to the magistrate, adulterous wench!" He struck a risibly over-pronounced pose of accusation, finger wagging in her face. It caused her to at last abandon the bow, snickering.

"And who, pray, is our Polixenes? You don't have to worry about me shagging Ron any time soon, that's for sure."

Their mirth seemed like too brief a respite from the sobering situation. With a heavy sigh, Harry shoved his hands in his pockets. The

discomfort had become so thick that he was relieved - and a bit startled - when Hermione suddenly spoke up.

"I'll call!" she blurted, as if saying it faster would make it seem more sincere. "Er, and write, truly, I will!"

"Oh, yeah, so will I!"

They stood there awkwardly for a few more moments. Then, to his surprise, she grinned very widely.

"You can still ride that bicycle, can't you?"

"Well... yeah, but that's far too long of a-"

"Apparation tests!"

His eyes flew open. "Oh, yeah... I can go down to the Ministry and take those, soon, can't I?" He then allowed himself a smirk. "Hope you're not planning on materializing unannounced in my bedroom. Aunt Petunia would go into conniptions if she caught us at anything."

She was too giddy with excitement to take in this remark. "Oh, I hope you pass them first try... I want to see you the very moment I can!"

"But I always figured I'd pop in on Mrs. Figg first."

"What?"

He laughed and said he was joking, but she just shook her head. "Stop being an ass. You almost had me thinking MY man had another woman."

"Oh, stuff and nonsense..." Harry felt his cheeks pinkening again at her tenacious tone, and he ran a hand through his unruly mop nervously, nearly knocking his spectacles from his nose. Droplets strained to loose themselves from his ducts, but he fought them back - he had to put on a brave face, or they'd both end up bawling. "You're my only woman, Hermione. Er, and my only man, I suppose."

"Shh!" she hissed, glancing around. Then she beamed at him, her striking, resplendent tawny eyes sparkling brighter and more beautiful than he'd ever seen them. "All of me. It all belongs to you, unconditionally... every last shred is yours. Forever."

The steam from the engine departing Platform Ten swirled around the lovers' passionate embrace, their shining Soul Gems reflecting in every surface with the brilliance of a thousand suns, causing passerby to start searching their handbags or pockets for sunglasses. The two best friends paid them no mind, drinking in the sensation of each other's touch, memorizing every last detail as if worried they would be tested on it. After all, it had to last them at least a few weeks.

Finite Incantatem